NO.4

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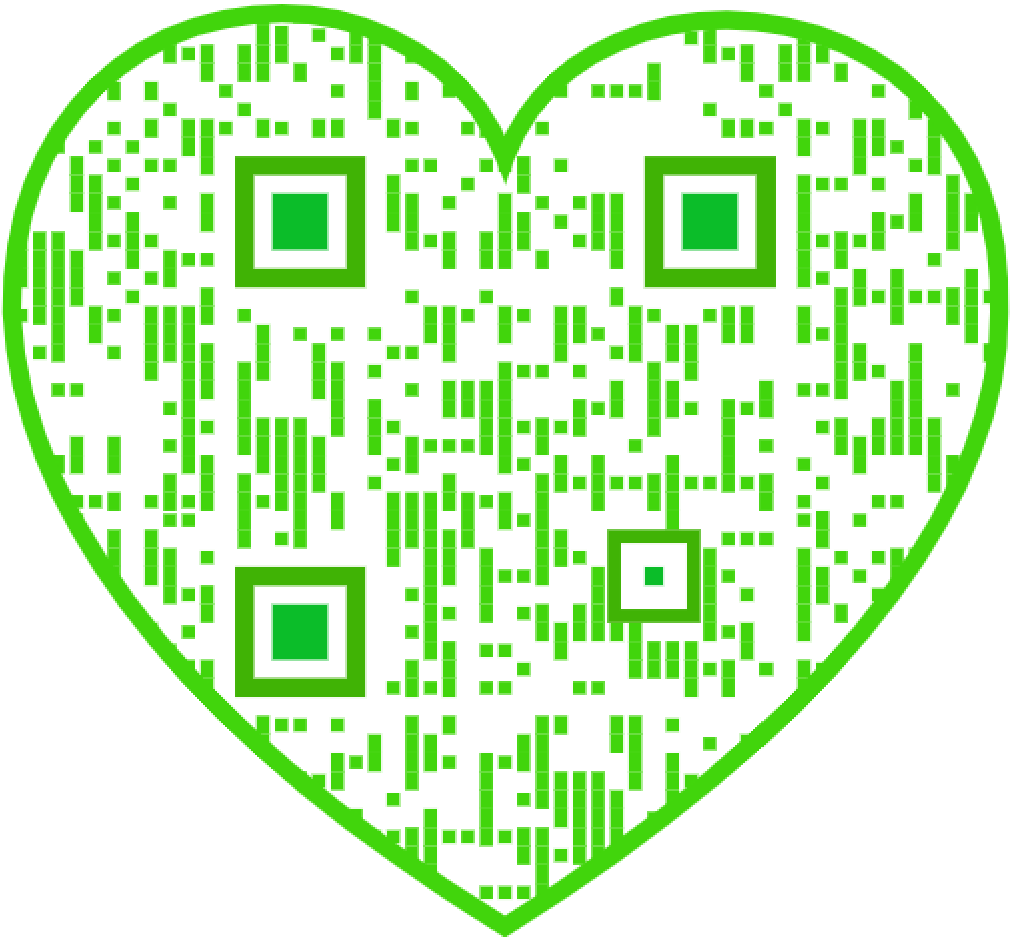

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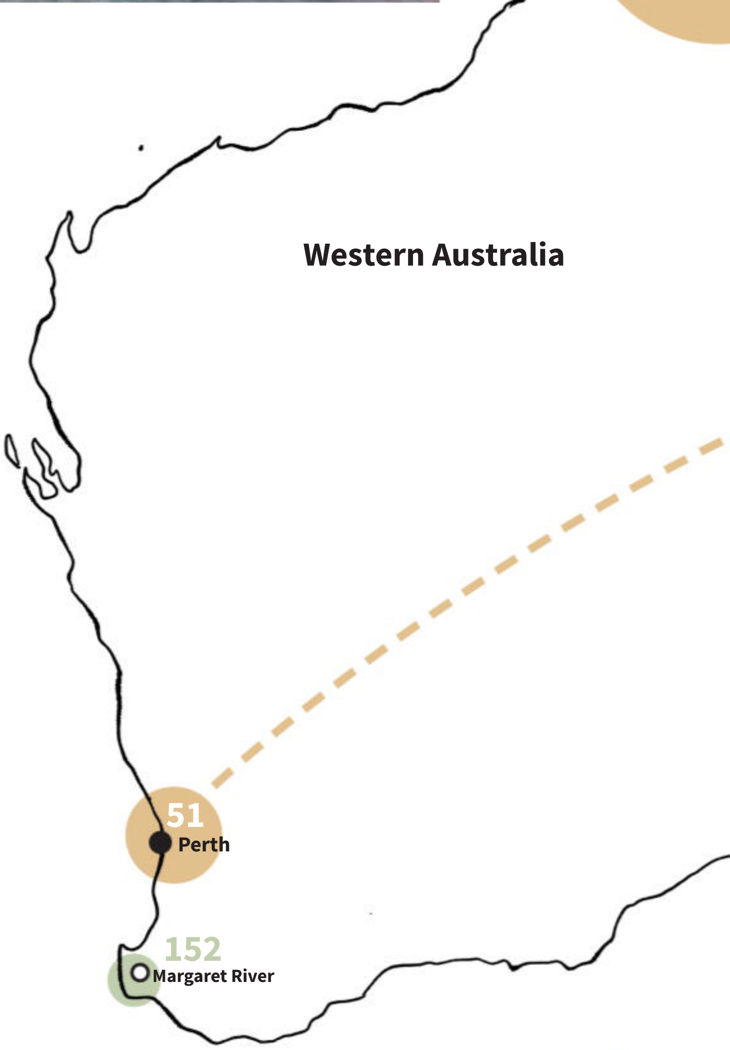

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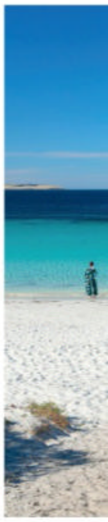

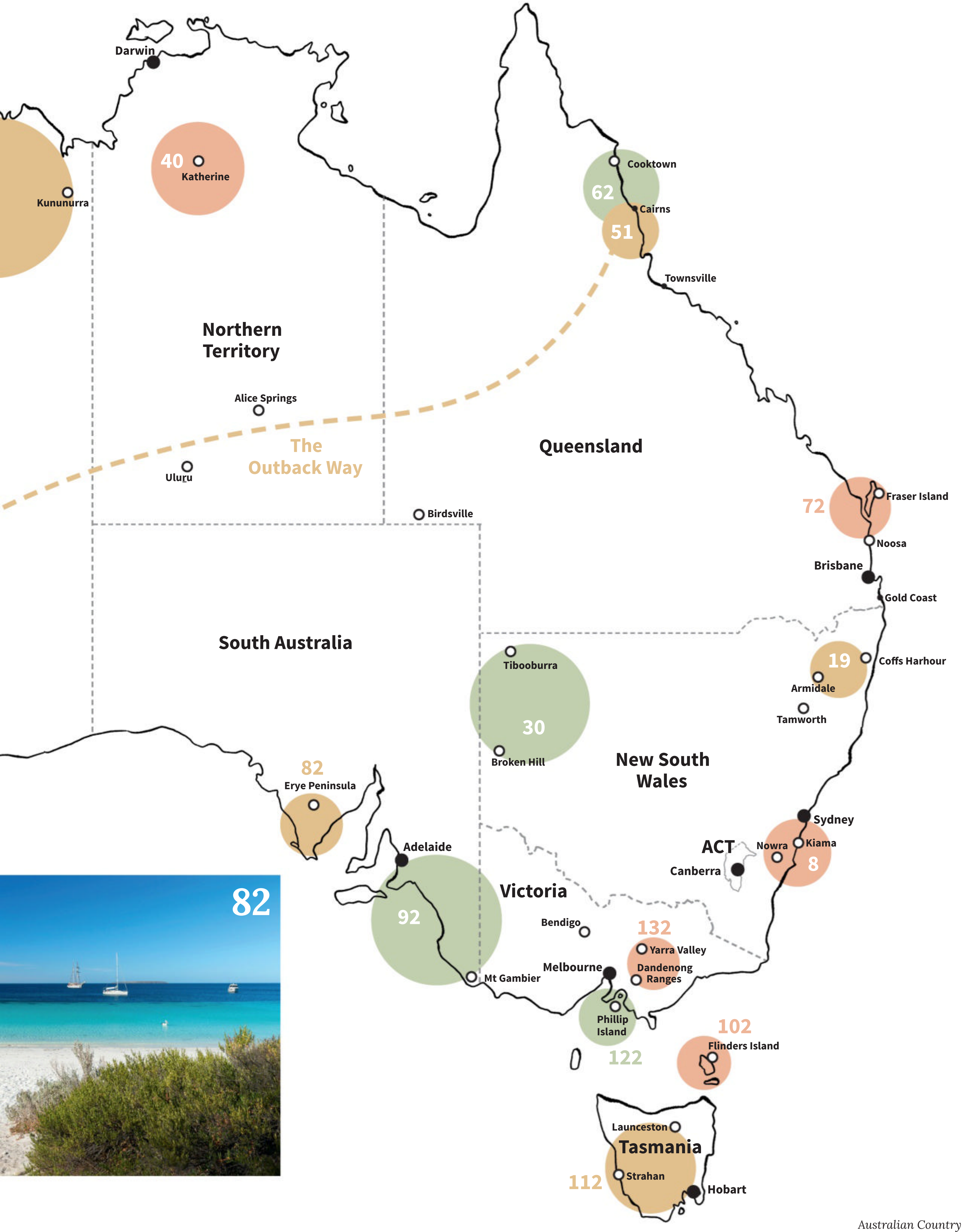
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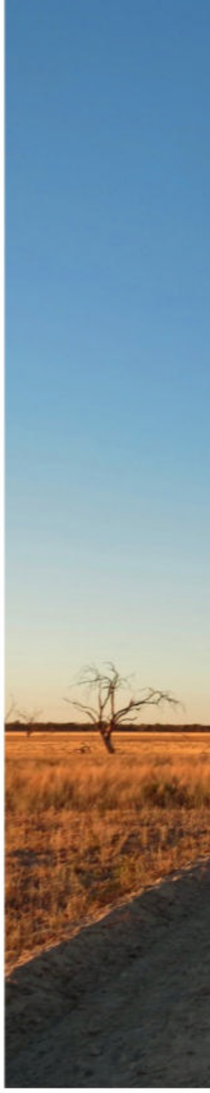

Editor's letter

Hello! My name is Lee Atkinson. I'm a travel writer and author of 16 books about road tripping, mostly in and around Australia. As someone who spends as much time as I can either on the road, writing about being on the road or planning my next road trip, I'm not ashamed to admit that I am a certified road trip junky. As far as I'm concerned, any excuse to hit the toad is a good one, which is why I was absolutely thrilled to be offered the opportunity to share 15 of my favourite Australian country drives for this fourth edition of *Australian Country Road Trips*.

Road tripping is in danger of becoming a lost art these days when holiday time is short and cheap airline tickets can get us where we want to go in hours, rather than days. But road trips are never just about getting from A to B — at least the best ones aren't. I love road trips, but I hate traffic and the high-speed cut and thrust of freeways. For me, the best trips are all about getting out of town rather than motoring from one city to another. Sure, I've done my share of commutes between capitals, but it's the country road trips that take you to out-of-the-way places that are the best fun and most memorable.

In this issue of *Australian Country Road Trips* you'll find road trips that suit every taste and every budget, in every state and territory, from the iconic cliff-hugging Grand Pacific Drive south of Sydney to the equally spectacular Great Barrier Reef Drive that winds its way along the coast and through the Daintree Rainforest north of Cairns in far north Queensland, to a road trip through the wilderness in Tasmania that's about as wild as you can get in a car.

If your idea of the perfect road trip includes lots of food and wine you'll love our trips though Western Australia's Margaret River, South Australia's Limestone Coast — if you never thought lobster and red wine go together this road trip will change your mind — and the vineyards of Victoria's Yarra Valley. Our road trip around the Eyre Peninsula combines wild coastal scenery with the world's best oysters, while our lap of Tasmania's Flinders Island showcases some of the world's most picturesque beaches (including one littered with 'diamonds'), proving that not all island paradises are found in the tropics.

If you've never been outback before, put the Silver City Highway on the top of your bucket list: now that the road to Tibooburra in far-western NSW is sealed, it's never been easier to get out into the wild red yonder.

For those that like adventure you can't beat the Outback Way, stretching from Cairns to Perth past Uluru in the Red Centre. It's one of the world's longest shortcuts, although the shortcut from Noosa to K'gari (Fraser Island) via the Great Beach Drive is another fantastic trip that trumps all other coastal highways because this road is actually on the beach. And if you've always dreamt of exploring the Kimberley on the famous Gibb River Road our story will show you how to turn the dream into reality.

If you are reading this then there is a very good chance that you love road trips as much as I do, and I know you'll love all of the trips in this issue. The hard bit is choosing which one to do first. Happy road tripping!

Lee

Lee Atkinson, editor

Sturt National Park, page 30

Coffin Bay National Park, page 82

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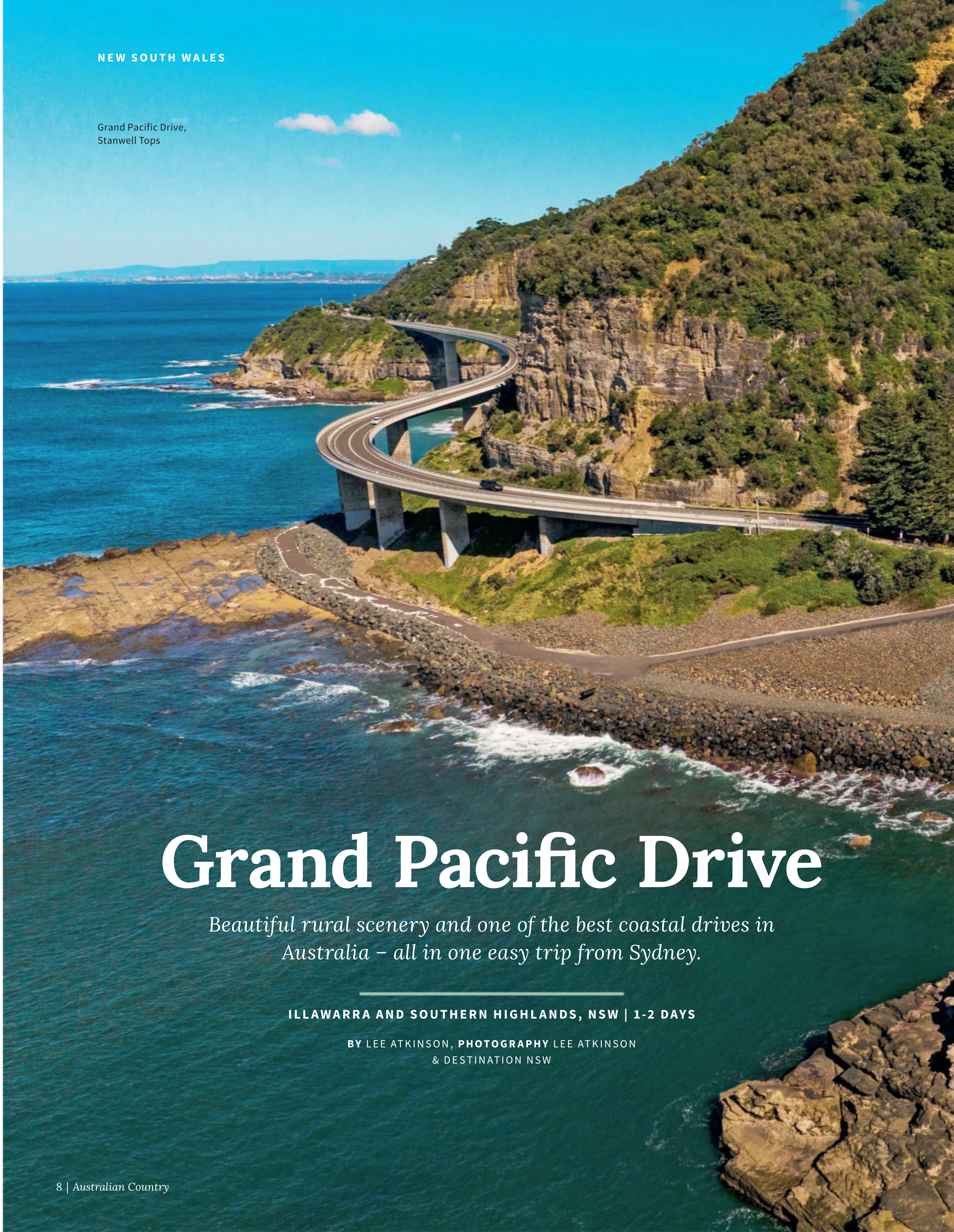


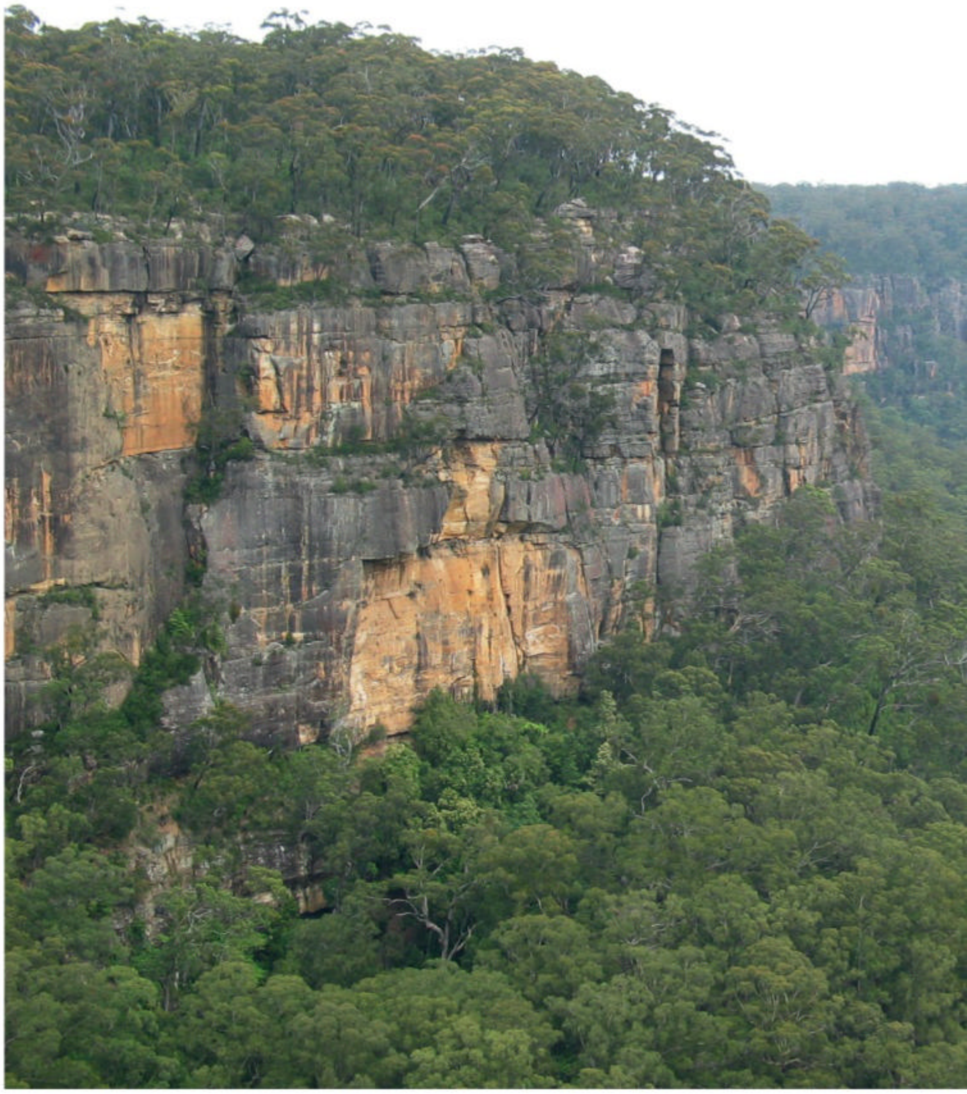
Grand Pacific Drive, Stanwell Tops

Grand Pacific Drive

Beautiful rural scenery and one of the best coastal drives in Australia – all in one easy trip from Sydney.

ILLAWARRA AND SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS, NSW | 1-2 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & DESTINATION NSW



Victoria's Great Ocean Road with its famous sea stacks and rock formations might get all the fame and glory as the country's most well-known coastal drive — after all, the six million tourists that drive it each year can't be wrong, can they? — but New South Wales has a great ocean road that is just as spectacular with a fraction of the traffic.

It's a 71km cliff-hugging coastal route that meanders along the coastline just south of Sydney, following, for the most past, Lawrence Hargrave Drive. Originally built in the 1860s to service the coal mines that have hollowed out the inside of the Illawarra Escarpment, the road, which was carved into the cliffs 40 metres above the surf, although breathtakingly scenic was at times breathtakingly dangerous. These cliffs, especially the section between the townships of Coalcliff and Clifton, had a terrifying tendency to slide into the sea, sometimes taking sections of the road with it, with bouncing boulders narrowly missing school buses and family cars on their way to the local shops. After dozens of near misses, the road was finally closed in 2003 while a final solution was formulated: a 665-metre-long multi-span balanced cantilever bridge that curves around the cliffs 50 metres out to sea, out of harm's way when it came to any errant rockfalls. Called the Sea Cliff Bridge, it's one of the highlights of the Grand Pacific Drive, and today it's an easy day trip from Sydney. Or make a weekend of it and take the long way there, twisting your way through forgotten hinterland valleys and exploring the back roads of the Southern Highlands.

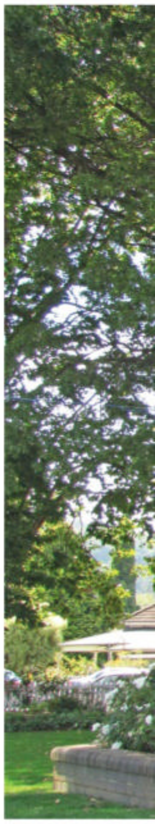
Most people do the cliff section of the drive on their way out of Sydney, but in the spirit of saving the best for last, and because the views are better heading north, we've approached the drive from the south.

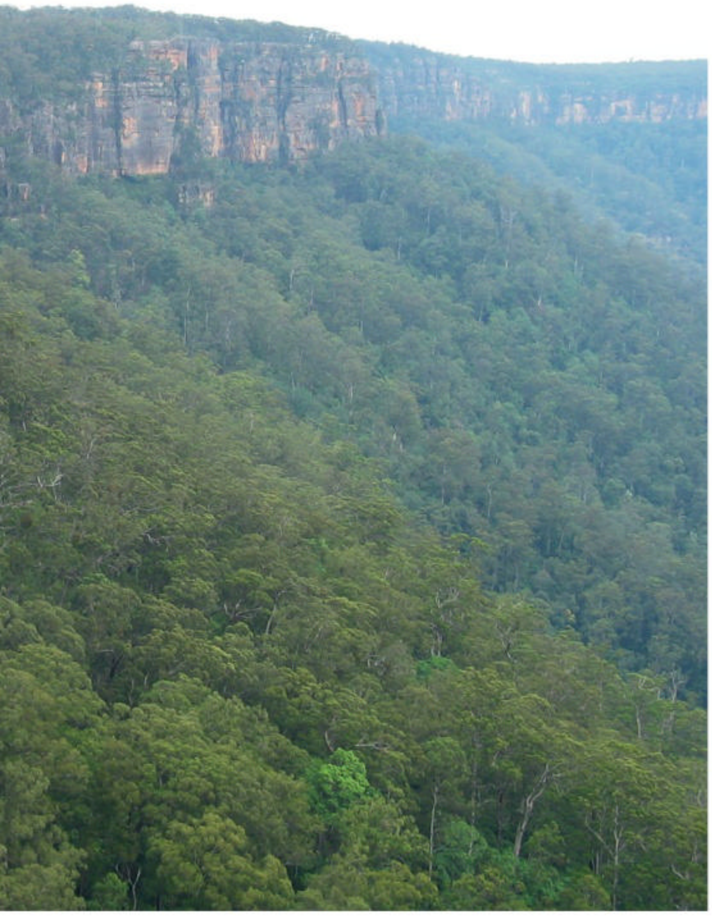
From Sydney, head south along the Hume Highway, turn off the freeway at Mittagong and wind your way through the highland towns of Bowral and Moss Vale, stopping to browse the galleries, bookshops and antique stores. If you're a cricket fan, you'll probably already know that Australia's greatest cricketer, Don Bradman, grew up in Bowral, but you can find out a whole lot more about him by spending a couple of hours at Bowral's Bradman Museum and International Cricket Hall of Fame. Gracious historic homes with well-established gardens and stately trees make this a great region to explore in autumn when the turning leaves are a blaze of colour, and in spring when the gardens are full of tulips and other blooms.

From Moss Vale, take the Nowra Road up through the mountains to Fitzroy Falls in Morton National Park. Here you can stretch your legs on the short walk to the lookout above the dramatic waterfall that tumbles 82m to the floor of the ravine below.

Continuing south, follow the signs to Manning Lookout to enjoy spectacular views over Kangaroo Valley, one of the state's prettiest valleys. The road then descends through wild bushland following a series of twists and turns down Barrengarry Mountain to reach the valley floor before crossing historic Hampden Bridge. Built across the Kangaroo River in 1898, it is the oldest suspension bridge in Australia. Stop for a swim at Flat Rock at the end of Upper Kangaroo River Road or have a picnic on the riverbank near the old hall in the village centre.

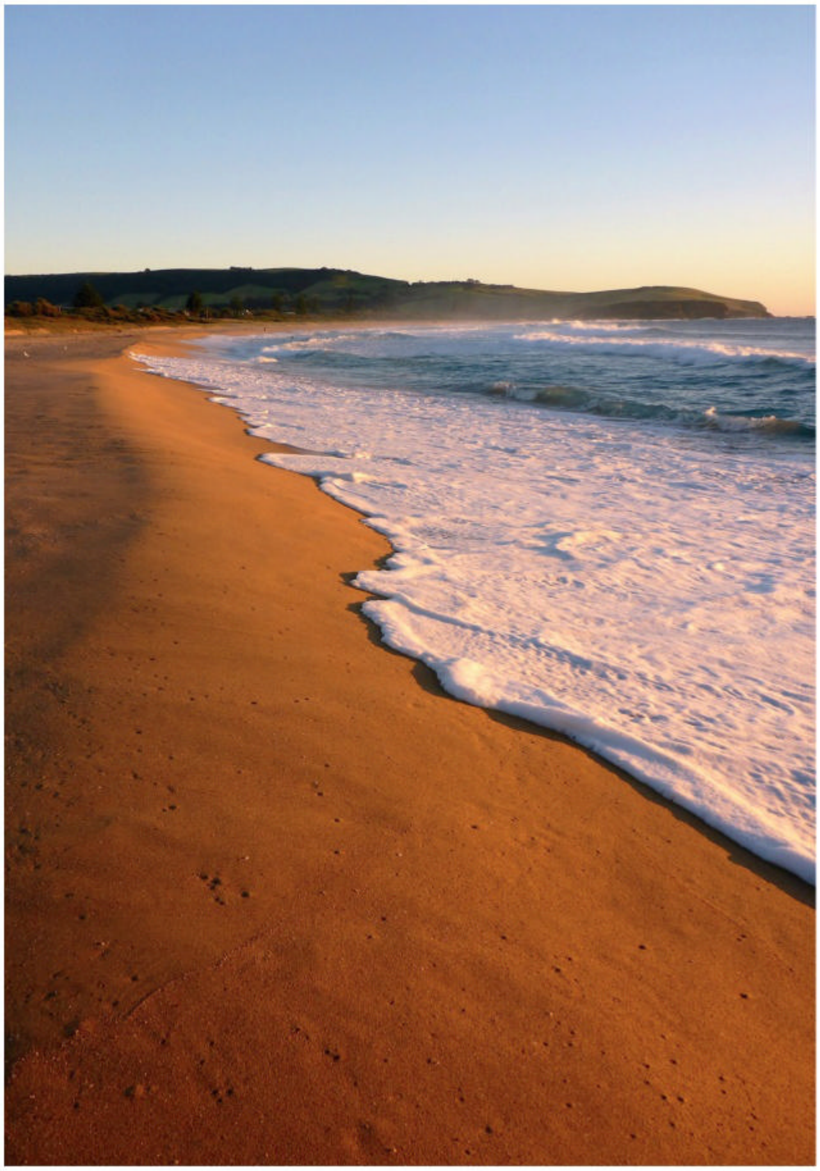
It's not far from here to Berry, where you can easily spend hours browsing the boutiques and antiques stores in this historic village — but the real reason to go is for the food and nearby wineries. There are half a dozen scattered around the district, but favourites include Crooked River with its fabulous restaurant and Coolangatta Estate with its





THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above left) Morton National Park; Fitzroy Falls; Bradman Oval Bowral; Corbett Gardens, Bowral.

Harry Springett ROTUNDA



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Werri Beach, Gerringong; sweet treats from the Famous Berry Donut Van, Berry; Kiama Blowhole; Kiama Coastal Walk, Gerringong; Kiama Surf Beach.

beautifully restored convict-built village. Whatever you do, don't leave Berry without pulling up at The Famous Berry Donut Van at Berry Service Station. They've been frying up piping-hot cinnamon-dusted circles of sweetness for more than 60 years, but don't make the mistake of thinking you'll grab some to take home because I guarantee you'll have eaten the lot before you get to the edge of town — possibly even before you make it back to your car.

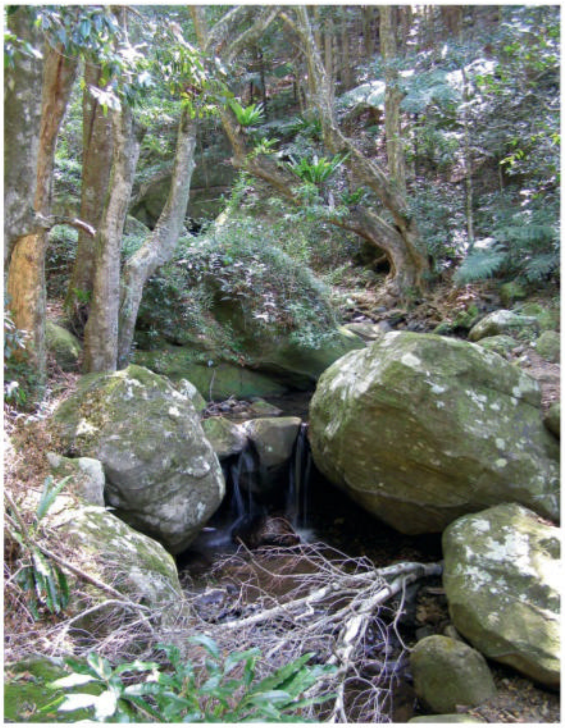
Keep heading east to hit the coast just south of Gerringong. There's no prize for guessing how Seven Mile Beach National Park, which stretches south of Gerringong to Shoalhaven Heads, got its name, but a beach this long is never going to feel crowded. Swim, surf, have a picnic or barbecue, watch the birds — and whales in winter — and hit the bushwalking trails. If you fancy an even longer stroll — or need to walk off the donuts — the Kiama Coast Walk is a fabulously scenic 20km coastal walk that links Gerringong and Kiama. It's broken up into three sections so you don't have to do the whole thing.

According to locals, Kiama is a Dharawal word meaning 'place where the sea makes a noise' and when you're standing beside the Kiama Blowhole — the largest blowhole in the world — getting soaked by the 30-metre-high jet of spray, you'll understand why. It's at its most impressive when there's a south-easterly wind blowing.

If you're road tripping with kids in summer, make a short detour inland to Jamberoo. Jamberoo Action Park is the largest water-based theme park in New South Wales. Teenagers love the Funnel Web, a monster-sized, cone-shaped ride and the Perfect Storm, a thrilling vortex water ride. Banjo's Billabong has water slides, cannons, sprays and buckets. Other attractions include a wave pool and a 'rapid river' ride, as well as bobsleds, racing cars and a chairlift.

Nearby, the wheelchair-accessible boardwalk in Minnamurra Rainforest that leads from the Rainforest Centre through subtropical and temperate rainforest to Minnamurra Falls is also great for little legs and strollers. The much

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Wollongong North Beach; Budderoo National Park Minnamurra Rainforest, Budderoo NP; Illawarra Fly Treetop Walk; Minnamurra Rainforest, Budderoo NP; Wollongong Harbour.



steeper walk to the falls can be hard going, but the stunning view of Minnamurra Falls and the canyon at the end is worth it. There's a cafe on site, as well as good picnic facilities, and you're almost guaranteed to see lyrebirds and wallabies.

If you've a head for heights, head up to the top of the Illawarra Fly, a 500m-long, 25m-high elevated tree-top walk around a 10-minute drive from Robertson. Climb the 45m-high lookout (if you dare), get bouncy on the edge of the springboard cantilevers or fly through the canopy on the zipline tour. On a clear day you can see all the way to the coast, 35km away.

Surfers should make a beeline to the beach called The Farm at Killalea State Park which, along with neighbouring Mystics Beach, was declared a National Surfing Reserve in 2009. If you haven't surfed before it's a good place to learn as the waves break farther out so you get more time to try and stand up.

Follow the coast north past the pretty town of Shellharbour, skirting the shoreline of Lake Illawarra, to Wollongong. The third largest city in New South Wales and a major coal, iron and steel producer, the 'Gong (as the locals call it) is, despite all that heavy industry, a very attractive place to spend a night. Explore the horseshoe-shaped cove of Wollongong Harbour, with its lighthouse, fishing fleet, fish markets and wonderful city beaches. Linger over

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Lady Wakehurst Drive, Royal National Park; Nan Tien Temple; Wattamolla, Royal National Park.

coffee in one of the many cafes along the foreshore or stockpile some inner harmony at the eight-storey Nan Tien Buddhist Temple — the largest Buddhist temple in the Southern Hemisphere. Or, if that sounds a little too serene for you, join a fascinating guided tour of the massive steel works and working port at Port Kembla.

The Illawarra Escarpment tumbles into the sea just north of Wollongong and marks the beginning of the signposted section of Grand Pacific Drive as the road follows the coastline north through a succession of seaside suburbs and villages.

Grand Pacific Drive crosses the famous cantilevered Sea Cliff Bridge between Clifton and Coalcliff: for better views and some stunning photo opportunities you can park the car and walk it before you drive it — it takes around 15 minutes to stroll from one end to the other.

Beyond the bridge, the road climbs through ferny forest above the beach to Stanwell Tops, high on the edge of the escarpment. Paragliders and hang-gliders soar on the thermals rising from the ocean below, emulating aeronautical pioneer Lawrence Hargrave, who made aviation history here by rising 5m above the ground strapped to a huge box kite in 1894. On a clear day, you can see as far south as Wollongong and enjoy a great view of the route over the Sea Cliff Bridge to the beaches beyond.

Soon after Stanwell Tops, Lawrence Hargrave Drive turns west to join the M1 Princes Motorway, which leads north to Sydney, but you should veer off to the right along Lady Wakehurst Drive. This winding, narrow road will take you through the heart of the Royal National Park, the world's second oldest national park, founded in 1879 (Yellowstone in the United States is seven years older). En route to Sydney's southern suburb of Waterfall, the road winds through eucalypt forests, over windswept heathland and across low-level river weirs. Sidetracks spear off to beaches and lookouts and there are dozens of great picnic and swimming spots along the way. Being so close to Sydney, the national park (affectionately known to locals as the *Nasho*) is a popular place on sunny weekends, when traffic snarls can be frustrating, but if you can time your drive for a weekday, you'll pretty much have it to yourself.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) North Beach Wollongong kiosk; Pines Surfing Academy; Coolangatta Estate, Shoalhaven Heads; Dressing room exhibit, Cricket Hall of Fame, Bowral; Symbio Wildlife Park.

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WHERE TO STAY

Dormie House, Moss Vale ***www.dormiehouse.com.au***
Novotel Wollongong Northbeach ***www.novotelnorthbeach.com.au***
Pilgrims Lodge Nan Tien Buddhist Temple, Berkeley ***nantien.org.au/en/visitor-info/accommodation***
Tumbling Waters Retreat, Stanwell Tops ***www.tumblingwatersretreat.com***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

The Famous Berry Donut Van, Berry ***berry.org.au/taste/berry-donut-van/***
Milkwood Bakery, Berry ***milkwoodbakery.com.au***
Crooked River Wines, Gerringong ***www.crookedriverwines.com***
Coolangatta Estate, Shoalhaven Heads ***coolangattaestate.com.au***
Bulli Beach Cafe, Bulli ***www.bullibeachcafe.com***
Diggies North Beach, North Wollongong ***www.diggies.com.au***
Lagoon Seafood Restaurant, Wollongong ***lagoonrestaurant.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Bradman Museum & International Cricket Hall of Fame, Bowral ***bradman.com.au***
Jamberoo Action Park, Jamberoo ***jamberoo.net***
Minnamurra Rainforest Centre, Jamberoo ***nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/things-to-do/visitor-centres/minnamurra-rainforest-centre***
Illawarra Fly, Knights Hill ***illawarrafly.com***
Pines Surfing Academy, Killalea State Park. ***pinessurfingacademy.com.au***
Nan Tien Temple, Berkeley ***www.nantien.org.au***
Steelworks tours, Port Kembla ***insideindustry.org.au/tours***
Australian Motorlife Museum, Kembla Grange ***australianmotorlifemuseum.com***
Tandem hang gliding flights, Stanwell Tops ***hangglideoz.com.au***
Symbio Wildlife Gardens, Helensburgh ***symbiozoo.com.au***

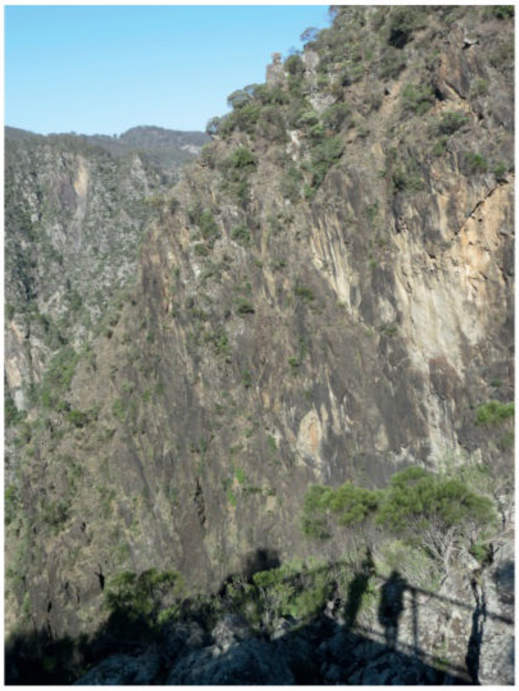
Red Cedar Falls Walking track, Dorrigo

The Waterfall Way

Wind your way through some of the most beautiful rainforest and gorge scenery in Australia, between Coffs Harbour and Armidale.

NEW ENGLAND TABLELANDS, NSW | 2-3 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & DESTINATION NSW



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Lyrebird Circuit Walk, New England NP; Dangars Gorge; Flowering tea tree in New England NP; Point Lookout, Dangar Falls, Dorrigo.

They don't make daredevils like they used to. It's more than 180 metres from the top to the bottom of Dangars Gorge near Armidale in the northern highlands of NSW, but that didn't seem to bother the flamboyant Signor Vertelli, who crossed the deep ravine on a tightrope in 1866. Not content with making the dangerous crossing once, the fearless funambulist (the Latin name for wire walker, a handy word to remember if you're a fan of pub trivia nights) crossed it again with a wheelbarrow and then, rather spectacularly, crossed it a third time doing somersaults. The crowd was so appreciative, according to newspaper reports of the day, that Vertelli collected eleven pounds for his troubles, which was quite a bit of money back then.

Just peering down at the depths from the viewing platform above Dangars Falls, where the Oxley River slams onto the rocks below, is enough to make your knees tremble, with or without a wheelbarrow.

Dangars Gorge — and Dangars Falls — are part of the World Heritage-listed Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, one of largest wilderness areas in NSW. Stretching between Armidale and Walcha, it's part of the New England Tableland where, after rain, rivers rage and tumble over the escarpment's jagged edge, creating some of the most spectacular, and highest, waterfalls in the state. This is falls country, and the best way to explore it is on the aptly named Waterfall Way, a 200km scenic drive from the mid-north coast near Coffs Harbour up and over the Great Dividing Range to Armidale.

Although you can do the whole drive in less than a day, to do so would mean missing out on several of the very good short walks in the national parks and zooming past countless

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Roadtrip in a campervan, Bellingen; Promised Land Loop; Bellingen's Hammond and Wheatley Emporium.

perfect picnic spots. This is one trip where the road itself really is the destination, not just a way to get somewhere else.

From Coffs Harbour, head south on the Pacific Highway to the sleepy river estuary town of Urunga, then west into the fertile hinterland hills and valleys to Bellingen. Today, the area is a pretty patchwork of lush farmlands, but the countryside, the traditional land of the Gumbaynggirr people, was once covered in great forests of red cedar and rosewood, and Bellingen began as a timber-getting town during the mid-19th century. The red cedar was soon all gone, and the town became the centre of a rich dairying industry. These days, Bellingen — Bello to the locals — is a lively centre for artists and alternative lifestylers, and the historic main street is an eclectic mix of cafes, galleries, restaurants and shops, where free-range and organic are the flavours of the day. On the third Saturday of each month, the very popular community market in Bellingen Park has a wide range of handmade and home-grown produce and local arts and crafts, and is a great place to pick up a bargain or some interesting valley-made souvenirs.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Dorrigo; Ebor Falls, Guy Fawkes River National Park; Everlasting Daisies, Ebor; Dorrigo.

HOTEL
DORRIGO
1925
HOTEL

Although it's not officially part of the Waterfall Way, the beautiful short loop drive just north of town through the peaceful farming valley called the Promised Land is well worth doing. From the centre of Bellingen, cross the Bellinger River and follow the signs to Gleniffer, where you'll see the sign pointing the way to the Promised Land (how can you resist?). The whimsy continues as you follow the course of Never Never Creek, through lush rainforest and bucolic green valleys. The drive will take around 45 minutes return to Bellingen.

From Bellingen, the Waterfall Way winds up through the rainforest to the mountain-top township of Dorrigo, passing several roadside waterfalls and lookouts along the way. As you climb, the humid coastal air gets cooler, and the forests denser, until the steep, often narrow road finally reaches the Dorrigo Plateau, 762m above sea level.

Situated just before Dorrigo township, Dorrigo National Park is a great place to stretch the legs, whether it's for a quick one-hour visit or an entire day spent following one of the longer bushwalks. Don't miss the Dorrigo Rainforest Centre inside the park which has an excellent interpretive display

and the Skywalk, a dramatic boardwalk above the rainforest canopy that leads out over the edge of the escarpment for spectacular views across the rainforest and down to the coast.

Just out of Dorrigo are the stunning Dangar Falls, on the eastern edge of the high-plateau gorge country (not to be confused with Dangars Falls, of fearless funambulist fame, farther up the road near Armidale). The viewing area is an easy walk from the car park, or you can take the 30-minute return bushwalk to the Bielsdown River.

From Dorrigo, the road rolls across the tablelands through open grazing country. In summer, the air is cool and dry; in winter, expect very chilly conditions, frequent fog and mist and even occasional snow. At Ebor, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it whistlestop about half an hour down the road from Dorrigo, you'll find Ebor Falls. At 1500m above sea level, the Guy Fawkes River rarely runs dry, making these spectacular double falls one of the most reliable of all the falls on the Waterfall Way. Ebor's also where you can treat yourself to some of the best buttermilk scones in the state at the cute little café called Fusspots at Ebor.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Armidale parkland; Elm Drive, Armidale; Iron lace, Armidale; Armidale Post Office.

Continue on towards Armidale but take a little detour on the way to drive 15km to Point Lookout. There is a short walk here through the misty, moss-covered, high-altitude rainforest to two viewing platforms that provide magnificent panoramic views to the north, east and south. On good days you can see as far as the coast, 70km away, although mist and fog can roll in at a minute's notice, so you may just find yourself admiring the inside of a cloud. You'll also find a good picnic area and day shelter here and a number of good bushwalking trails.

Back on the Waterfall Way, the road skirts the edge of Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, home to two more magnificent waterfalls and rugged gorge country. Aside from the waterfall lookout at Dangars Gorge, where Signor Vertelli performed his death-defying show, there's Wollomombi Gorge, where the spectacular single-drop waterfall is often quoted as Australia's tallest, although the devil is in the detail because it's measured from its highest point where the land has a much gentler gradient and the water does not truly 'fall'. Even so, if you're here after heavy rain when the falls are at their most furious, it's a truly awesome thing to see. During dry times, the falls stop, although the gorge itself is still an impressive sight.

Armidale, the finishing point of the Waterfall Way, is about half an hour's drive from the national park across undulating high-country plains. It's a lively regional city with a vibrant university and many grand historical buildings, testimony to the town's importance as a centre for the surrounding wealthy pastoral grazing properties. Australia's highest city, Armidale is especially beautiful in autumn (mid to late April), when the turning leaves of the deciduous trees in the many parks and avenues paint the town in shades of red, yellow, orange and crimson. If you're after the classic autumn shot for your socials take a drive up towards the university on Elm Ave, an extensive avenue lined with grand homes, parklands and stately golden elms. In Curtis Park on the edge of the CBD shopping district, you'll find a sculpture of wire-walking Signor Vertelli. It was erected in late 2012, and is the work of Bill Dangar, the great grandson of Henry Dangar who once owned much of the land that is now national park. The magnificent summer home of the Dangar family, on Dangarsleigh Road, is now a beautiful guesthouse and also the cellar door of Petersons Armidale Winery, which does a superb sparkling.

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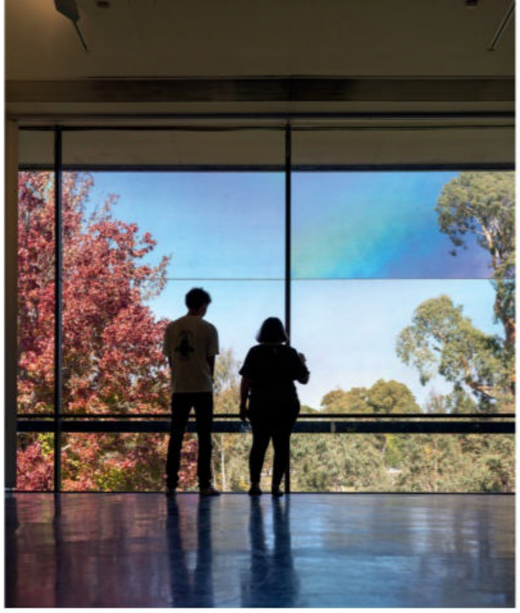
POST & TELEGRAPH OFFICE
ARMIDALE



THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Petersons Armidale; New England Regional Art Museum; Saumarez Homestead.

If you're an art lover, you'll love NERAM (New England Regional Art Museum). The back story of how this smallish regional gallery came into possession of one of the country's best collections of Australian art (think Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Norman Lindsay, Lionel Lindsay, Julian Ashton, William Dobell, Lloyd Rees, J.J. Hilder, Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor, among others) reads more like the plot of a Charles Dickens novel or a Hollywood movie script than real life.

During the height of the Great Depression in the 1930s, a mysterious man living in a tiny room in a dingy boarding house in Sydney suddenly started sending a fortune in art, piece by piece, to a fledgling Teachers College in Armidale, a country town he had never even visited. His name was Howard Hinton, and between 1929 and 1948, the shipping clerk and avid art collector sent more than 1000 works of art to Armidale, creating — and giving away — one of the greatest collections of Australian art ever made. It's still one of the most significant collections of late 19th and early 20th Century Australian art outside a capital city. Not all of it is on display, so book ahead for a storeroom tour.

Another treasure in town is Saumarez Homestead, a beautiful 10-acre property out near the airport that was established in the 1830s by the White family. In quirky Victorian tradition, each room was left exactly as it was when the owners left town, got married or passed away, leaving behind a 30-room snapshot of Edwardian life and times, full of original furniture and clutter that volunteer guides bring to life with juicy tales of gossip about the original inhabitants.

The homestead is adjacent the airport, so while you're there why not round off your Waterfall Way road trip with a spectacular helicopter flight over the surrounding rugged gorges and waterfalls of the tablelands and escarpment with Fleet Helicopters? It's a bit of a splurge, but one you won't soon forget, and it's a much easier way to get an exhilarating view than walking a wire. I'm sure the Signor would approve.

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Old Butter Factory, Bellingen; Thunderbolt; Three Blue Ducks, Bellingen; Skywalk Lookout, Dorrigo National Park; Big Banana.

THE BIG BANANA
COFFS HARBOUR

SIDETRACK

This 70km loop from Armidale is the perfect day trip, particularly in Autumn. Head south down the New England Highway to Uralla. This is Thunderbolt country, and you've as much chance of escaping the clutches of this cavalier bushranger as the police had of capturing him when he roamed the countryside around Uralla in the 1860s. The rocks he used as a lookout are just south of town, he's buried in the Uralla cemetery, there are all sorts of Thunderbolt artefacts in the McCrossin's Mill Museum and almost every business in town is pushing the Thunderbolt connection with pies, motels, cafes and monuments all proudly sporting the outlaw's name. Circle back to Armidale via Tourist Drive 19 across the Salisbury Plain, stopping at Gostwyck's little ivy-covered church — in autumn the ivy turns a brilliant red and makes for great photographs.

WHERE TO STAY

Pacific Bay Resort, Coffs Harbour ***pacificbayresort.com.au.***
The Lodge Bellingen ***thelodgebellingen.com.au.***
Lindsay House, Armidale ***lindsayhouse.com.au.***
Petersons Guesthouse, Armidale ***petersonsguesthouse.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Latitude 30, Coffs Harbour latitude30.com.au
Three Blue Ducks, Bellingen ***threeblueducks.com/bellingen***
Old Butter Factory, Bellingen ***oldbutterfactory.com.au***
Fusspots at Ebor, ***facebook.com/fusspotsatebor***
Archie's on the Park, Armidale ***mooreparkinn.com.au/restaurant***
The Welders Dog, Armidale ***theweldersdog.com.au***
Whitebull Hotel, Armidale ***whitebull.net.au***

WHAT TO DO

The Big Banana Fun Park, Coffs Harbour ***bigbanana.com***
National Cartoon Gallery, Coffs Harbour ***nationalcartoongallery.com.au***
Whale and dolphin watching Coffs Harbour ***whalewatchexperience.com.au***
Coffs Coast Wildlife Sanctuary, Coffs Harbour ***coffscoastwildlifesanctuary.com.au***
Dorrigo Rainforest Centre, ***nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/visit-a-park/parks/dorrigo-national-park***
New England Regional Art Museum (NERAM), Armidale. ***neram.com.au***
Saumarez Homestead, Armidale ***nationaltrust.org.au/places/saumarez-homestead***
Fleet Helicopters, Armidale ***fleetadventures.com.au/helicopter-adventures***
Petersons Armidale Winery, ***petersonswines.com.au/armidale***

Silver City Highway

You don't need a four-wheel drive to explore the outback on this trip up the Silver City Highway from Wentworth to Tibooburra.

FAR-WESTERN NSW | 10 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & DESTINATION NSW

If you want a taste of the outback but don't have a four-wheel drive, or don't relish driving on dirt roads, there's really only one place to go: up the Silver City Highway to the outback outpost of Tibooburra, one of the state's most remote and characterful towns.

The Silver City Highway stretches almost 600km from Wentworth, not far from the Victorian border, to Tibooburra, in the top end corner of the state near Queensland. It cuts a straight line through the far west of New South Wales and offers a great introduction to the outback. It's a delightfully easy drive now since the last section of the road, between Broken Hill and Tibooburra, has finally been sealed. It might be blacktop all the way but the endless red dust plains sprinkled with saltbush and mulga, with mobs of kangaroos and emus and cackling galahs, are about as outback as you'll ever find on an all-weather road.

Along the way you'll travel through the lush farming lands of the Sunraysia area, rich with vineyards, orchards and agriculture, followed by dry mallee scrub before you reach the highway's namesake: the silver and zinc mining city of Broken Hill, which is also a celebrated art centre. There's abandoned ghost towns to explore, atmospheric outback pubs to drink in, red sand dunes to climb and jump-ups covered in wildflowers to admire. The Silver City Highway also skirts past four very different outback national parks: the eroded lunar-like sands of Mungo National Park; bountiful Kinchega National Park with its lakes, birdlife and pastoral heritage; mysterious Mutawintji National Park, rich in First Nations culture and art; and Sturt National Park, its claypans and plains shimmering in the heat on the doorstep of the desert.

Distances are quite vast between points of interest, and there are plenty of things to see and do in all the towns and parks on the trip, so even though you could easily drive the route in two days, a week to 10 days is the recommended travel time to really do the area justice — after all, chances are you'll have come a long way to get there, so you may as well stay for a while. Summer can be very hot and the flies are extremely friendly — winter (although nights can be cold) is the most pleasant time to travel through the area.

Kick off the fun in Wentworth in New South Wales, 29km north-west of the Victorian regional centre of Mildura. A pretty river port with many heritage buildings, Wentworth has the distinction of being the town where Australia's two longest rivers, the Darling and the Murray, converge. From the lookout tower in Junction Park, you can see the different-coloured waters eddy together beneath the cruising houseboats and the historic paddlesteamers that take passengers on lunch or tea-and-coffee river cruises.

Silver City Highway
near Broken Hill

One of the don't-miss attractions in town is old Wentworth Gaol. Established in 1879, it was the first Australian-designed gaol to be built in Australia. The prison is now an interesting museum where you can wander through the old cells and grounds. There are some good displays on local history, notably one on Harry Nanya, a Maraura leader who resisted forsaking his traditional way of life long after European settlement in the area.

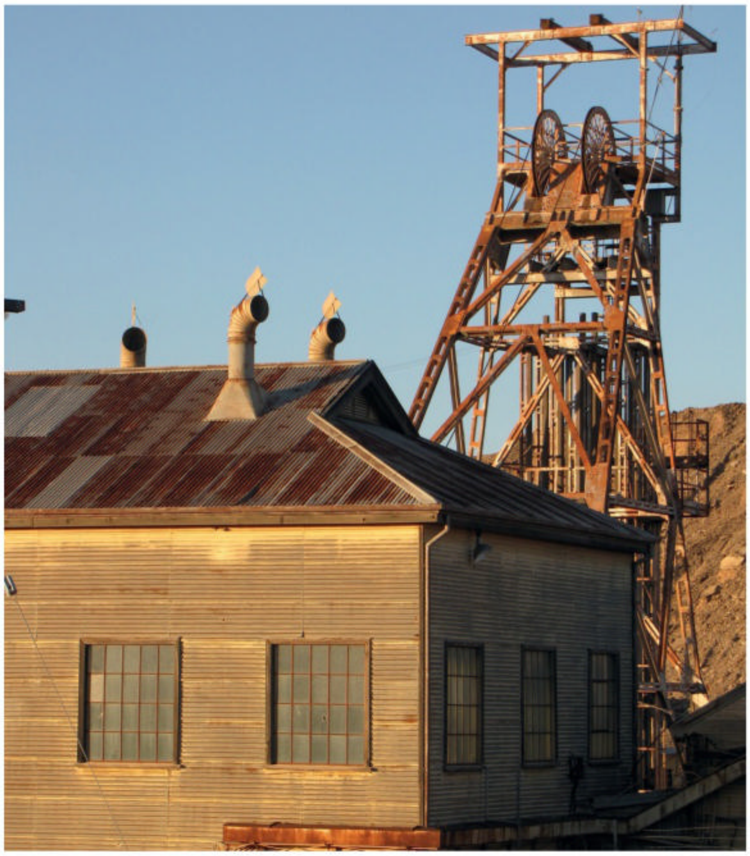
When you leave the green, well-watered Wentworth behind you, the landscape quickly changes to dry mallee scrub, and then gets seriously outback-y at Perry Sandhills. These rolling, red sandhills are in stark contrast to the surrounding irrigated fields and are now a popular film and television backdrop, but they were once a favoured hunting and camping ground for the Barkindji people. The sandhills are constantly shifting as the wind picks up and redeposits the sand, uncovering the skeletal remains of giant kangaroos and wombats. Ask at the visitors centre in Wentworth for directions.

Mungo National Park — part of the traditional lands of the Pakantji, Ngyiampaa and Mutthi Mutthi people — is signposted from Wentworth. Sections of the 100km access road are unsealed, but it's fine for 2WDs as long as it hasn't been raining recently. Fifteen thousand years ago, the vast, flat plain was a huge lake. Along the eastern shore of the ancient lake bed is a great crescent-shaped dune called a lunette — a huge 22km-long wall of sand and clay eroded into weird and fantastic formations. Nicknamed the Walls of China by Chinese station workers in the 19th century, the lunette has been found to contain traces of ancient campfires and middens, countless early tools and the world's oldest cremated human remains, which are somewhere between 45,000 and 60,000 years old (the experts are still quibbling). When the first skeletal remains were discovered back in 1968, the estimated date for the earliest human occupation of Australia was around 20,000 years ago. Mungo Woman, as the remains became known, along with another find made in 1974, named Mungo Man, redefined world prehistory and, in turn, helped ensure that the ancient lake system would become Australia's first World Heritage-listed national park.

Since then, more skeletal and fossil remains, both human and marsupial, have been found, including the skeleton of a buffalo-sized wombat, Zygomaturus, and, most recently, a set of 20,000-year-old human footprints. There is a short walk from the carpark to a viewing platform at the Walls of China, or you

H.M. WENTWORTH GAOL

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Lunette, Mungo National Park; emu with chicks, Mungo National Park; Old Wentworth Gaol; Mungo Woolshed; Perry Sandhills, Wentworth.



can take a 60km signposted drive tour through the park around the north-eastern shore of the lake. The park is particularly beautiful in the evening when the white-sand lunette changes colour and glows in the light of the setting sun.

Broken Hill is 270km north of Wentworth, along an almost dead straight, sealed road; there is no fuel available along the way so make sure you fill up in Wentworth.

If you've got a 4WD or an SUV, branch off the Silver City Highway to take the Darling River Road, which follows the course of the state's longest river to Menindee, around a two-hour drive (if you don't have a high-clearance vehicle, you can still visit Menindee and Kinchega, but you need to go via Broken Hill). In a good year, Menindee, which proudly proclaims itself the 'first' town on the Darling (meaning oldest), is a veritable desert oasis. It is here that the Darling River flows into the Menindee Lakes, forming three huge bodies of water, two of which are part of Kinchega National Park, although during times of extended drought when the Darling stops flowing the lakes may be dry. It's a beautiful spot to visit when there is water in the system, and some of the best campsites in the state are strung out along the bank of the Darling River. When the lakes are full, birdlife is prolific, and the sunsets over the lakes are spectacular — although beware of kangaroos if driving after dark. Much of the park was originally Kinchega Station, and you can visit the original 62-stand woolshed, built in 1875, where more than six million sheep were shorn before the station became a national park in 1967. Back in Menindee, have a drink at Maidens Hotel. In 1860, explorers Burke and Wills stayed here at the beginning of their ill-fated trip that ended at Cooper Creek. William Wright, the man who was blamed for a large part of the tragedy, was a station manager at Kinchega before he joined their party.

Closer to Adelaide than Sydney (it runs on South Australian not New South Wales time), Broken Hill, nicknamed the Silver City, made its fortune from the wealth of silver and zinc lying beneath the ground here, which was first discovered in the 1880s. Getting the wealth out of the ground was dangerous work, though, and more than 800 miners have died in the mines under the city. One site you can't miss (you can see it from just about anywhere in town) is the Miners Memorial atop the 7km-long Line of Lode, a mountain of mine tailings.

If you're keen on learning more about the evolution of the local mining industry White's Mineral Art Gallery and Mining Museum has imaginative mineral art and some ingenious mining models, and the nearby Albert Kersten Mining and Minerals Museum (also known as the GeoCentre) is an interactive museum of minerals.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Mundi Mundi Lookout near Broken Hill; Broken Hill's Palace Hotel; Cawndilla Lake, Kinchega National Park; Broken Hill has a mining heritage; Broken Hill Miners Memorial.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Broken Hill's Living Desert Sculptures, *Under the Jaguar Sun* by Antonio Nava Tirado; Ruins at Milparinka; Silverton.

Broken Hill might have been founded on minerals, but the intensity of the desert light has attracted artists and creatives to the remote mining town for decades, and it's now one of the state's most vibrant arts centres. There are dozens of galleries in town and at nearby Silverton. Don't miss the Broken Hill City Art Gallery and the Sculpture Symposium in the Living Desert reserve on the outskirts of town, where 12 sandstone sculptures sit atop a hill overlooking the plains below. It's a great spot for a picnic or sunset barbecue with a view (there are gas barbecues at the site).

For an even deeper immersion into the local art scene, pop into the front bar of the Palace Hotel. Originally built as a Coffee Palace in 1889, this grand three-storey hotel fringed with iron lace verandas is a giant artwork, with almost every spare centimetre of wall and ceiling space covered in colourful murals. Look closely and you'll notice that every single landscape — and there are lots — contains a water feature as the hotel owner's brief to Indigenous artist Gordon Waye was to make the hotel feel like "an oasis in the outback". If it looks a little familiar it's because the pub was featured in the 1994 hit movie *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, and is one of the main venues for the annual Broken Heel Festival, a riot of disco, drag and divas held in September.

It's not the only place in these parts to star on the silver screen. The tiny town of Silverton, 25km north-west of Broken Hill, is one of the most famous movie locations in New South Wales. It was pretty much a ghost town until it became the set for *Mad Max 2* back in 1981 but since then dozens of movies and commercials have followed, including *Razorback*, *A Town Like Alice*, *Dirty Deeds* and *The Craic*, making it perhaps one of the most recognisable small towns in the country. Drop in and have a cold drink at the Silverton Hotel and you'll hear all about them. The Mad Max Museum, just down the road, likes to boast that it's Australia's first and only museum dedicated to *Mad Max 2*. It certainly blurs the line between collection and obsession at any rate! Other attractions include underground tours of Day Dream Mine, showing how mining was done in the 1880s; the Silverton Gaol and Historical Museum; and many of the historic buildings in town that now house an eclectic mix of art galleries. Stop at the Mundi Mundi lookout (4km north of Silverton) for great views over the desert plains.

From Broken Hill it's a straight run north for 332km to Tibooburra along a beautiful stretch of road that was sealed during the pandemic. But if you don't mind a bit of dirt (dusty and a little bumpy, but fine for 2WDs) take a little detour along the way to Mutawintji National Park. This spectacular park, on the traditional land of the Pantjikali, Wanyuparlku, Wilyakali and Malyangapa people, is home to some remarkable gorge country and rock art that dates back more than 8000 years. Take a self-guided tour of Homestead Gorge to Wrights Cave, where you can see engravings and stencils, or one of the longer walks to Mutawintji Gorge — a delightful swimming hole surrounded by towering red cliffs — or the Rockholes Loop track, which is a bit steep but rewards your hard slog with stunning views of the surrounding desert and ranges. If you're lucky you may even spot one of the endangered yellow-footed rock wallabies. A bonus if you're camping is that there are solar-heated showers — a rare treat in most national park campgrounds.

Back on the Silver City Highway, which winds through very photogenic Jump Up country (Jumps Ups are flat mesa-like mountains that rise dramatically from the surrounding plains), stop at Milparinka, 39km south of Tibooburra, to stretch your legs and look at the displays inside the historic courthouse and other stone buildings. Today Milparinka is a ghost town in the middle of nowhere — although the historic pub has reopened

GALLERY
OPEN

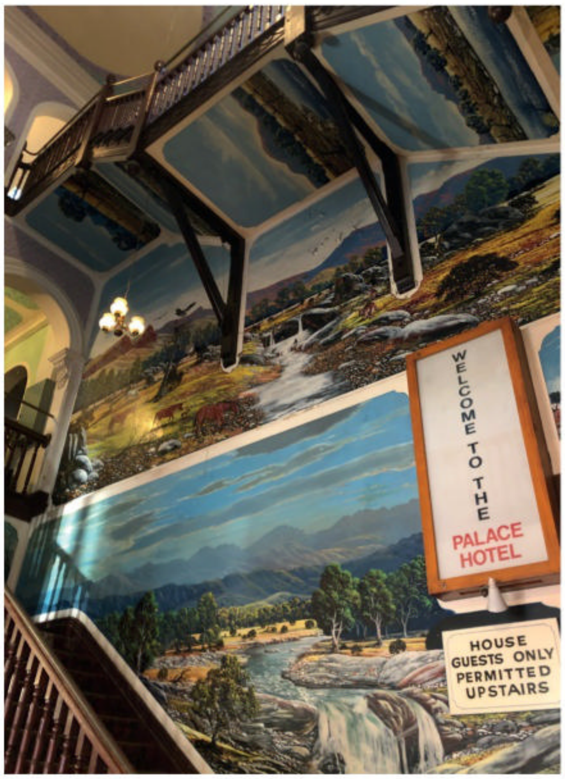
The Family
Hotel

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Lake Pinaroo, Sturt National Park; Replica of Sturt's boat, Tibooburra; Tibooburra Family Hotel.

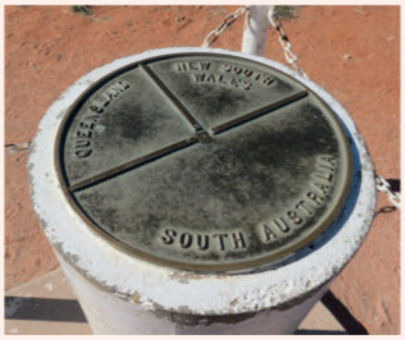
— but back in the 1880s it was a thriving gold rush settlement, and the impressive buildings testify to its past importance as an administrative centre. The ruins are slowly being restored by volunteers.

On the edge of the Strzelecki Desert, Tibooburra feels like a true frontier town. The Family Hotel is famous for its rather saucy murals, painted by artist Clifton Ernest Pugh (three-time winner of the Archibald Prize, as well as an Order of Australia medal in 1985) in the late 1960s. According to locals, Clifton became stranded at the pub during the wet season, got bored and started painting the walls. In Pioneer Park, on the edge of town, you can see a replica of the boat that the explorer Charles Sturt hoped to sail across the inland sea he was searching for in 1845. He never found that sea, although he did chart much of central Australia. Tibooburra is also a good base for day trips into Sturt National Park with its startling jump-ups and beautiful, but ephemeral, Lake Pinaroo. After rain, the dry plains transform into a sea of green, and kangaroos and emus are everywhere. You can camp in the national park, and there are two motels in Tibooburra, as well as a rustic caravan park, so stay for a day or two and soak up some of the local tall tales at the hotel. Road tripping into the outback is now a whole lot easier than it used to be.

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery; Cameron Corner; Bells Milk Bar, Broken Hill; the Palace Hotel, Broken Hill.


WELCOME TO THE PALACE HOTEL
HOUSE GUESTS ONLY PERMITTED UPSTAIRS

CORNER COUNTRY



If you have a 4WD, you can head a farther 140km north-west to Cameron Corner along a rough, unsealed road to the point where New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland meet among the red dunes of the Strzelecki Desert. There's not much at Cameron Corner — just the the dingo fence (one of the longest structures in the world at a whopping 5614km long) and the corner store on the Queensland side. But like all good corner shops it sells everything: fuel, basic mechanical gear, food supplies, snacks, cold beer and souvenirs. Stop and chat a while with the owners, who can fill you in on local road conditions. Although conventional cars have been known to survive the trip, you really do need a vehicle with high clearance and caravans aren't recommended, although off-road camper trailers will be fine. It might seem like a long way to go just to visit a corner store, but there are not many places where you can stand in three states at once.

WHERE TO STAY

Mungo Lodge, Mungo National Park ***mungolodge.com.au***
Astra Hotel, Broken Hill ***theastra.com.au***
Miners' cottages, Broken Hill ***visitbrokenhill.com/Stay/Cottages-Holiday-Houses***
Granites Motel/Caravan Park, Tibooburra ***tibooburramotel.com.au***
The Family Hotel, Tibooburra ***tibooburra.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Bells Milk Bar South Broken Hill, ***bellsmilkbar.com.au***
The Palace Hotel, Broken Hill ***thepalacehotelbrokenhill.com.au***
Broken Hill Distillery, Broken Hill ***brokenhilldistillery.com.au***
Maidens Hotel, Menindee ***facebook.com/maidenshotelnsw***
Tibooburra Hotel, Tibooburra ***tibooburrahotel.com.au/outback-dining***

WHAT TO DO

Old Wentworth Gaol, Wentworth ***experiencewentworth.com.au***
Wentworth Pioneer Museum, Wentworth ***experiencewentworth.com.au***
Mungo National Park, Pooncarie ***visitmungo.com.au***
White's Mineral Art Gallery and Mining Museum, Broken Hill ***brokenhill.nsw.gov.au***
Albert Kersten Mining and Minerals Museum, Broken Hill ***brokenhill.nsw.gov.au/Facilities/Albert-Kersten-Mining-and-Minerals-Museum***
Broken Heel Festival, Broken Hill ***bhfestival.com/about-broken-heel***
Broken Hill City Art Gallery, Broken Hill ***bhartgallery.com.au***
Living Desert State Park, Broken Hill ***visitbrokenhill.com/Play/Living-Desert-State-Park***
Mad Max Museum, Silverton ***silverton.org.au/mad-max-museum/***
Daydream Mine, Silverton ***daydreammine.com.au***

Unsung Wonders of the Top End

Chill out in the forgotten gorges and thermal pools of the Top End

KATHERINE REGION, NT | 3-4 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM NT

When it comes to Top End adventures Kakadu and Litchfield national parks might steal the limelight, but if you're prepared to get a little off the beaten track there are plenty more natural wonders hiding in plain sight in and around the Katherine region. This road trip around Katherine, taking in Nitmiluk (Katherine Gorge), Mataranka Springs, Flora River and Judbarra/Gregory National Park, will take you to some of the Top End's most magnificent, yet underrated, spots.

Katherine — the third largest town in the Northern Territory — is an easy three-hour drive south of Darwin and proof that you don't have to have a 4WD to see the best of the outback. Katherine Gorge in Nitmiluk National Park is one of the most impressive spots in the Top End, and it's just a half-hour drive from Katherine on a sealed road. Here, the Katherine River carves a deep channel through towering red sandstone cliffs to form 13 spectacular gorges, each separated by a tumble of boulders and a string of rapids. The 3,000-square-kilometre park is owned and run by the area's traditional owners, the Jawoyn people. Nitmiluk means 'Place of the Cicada' and comes from the dreaming story that describes how Nabilil, one of the important figures of the creation time, came to the gorge, and upon hearing the cicada's song, *Nit! Nit! Nit!*, named it Nitmiluk.

Like everywhere in the Top End, it's a wild landscape that changes according to the weather. During the wet season — December through to April — the river is a raging torrent of water-borne fury, but during the dry season — between May and November — you can hire canoes and paddle the gorge, see it from above on a scenic helicopter flight, explore it on foot on one of the many walking trails, or take one of several cruises.

Cruises range from three-hour trips through the first three gorges to five-hour cultural experiences that include basket weaving and other traditional activities (including the opportunity to taste some kangaroo tail at lunch), and floating sunset and three-course dinner tours. All are led by Jawoyn guides. On the longer trips there is time to swim, explore, or just relax in the shade by the river. All trips include some walking and rock-hopping between gorges so remember to wear comfortable and sturdy walking shoes and pack plenty of sunscreen. The best time to go is during the late afternoon, when you'll get the best photo opportunities as the walls of the famous gorge glow a deep and vibrant red.

There is a swimming platform near the visitor centre complex in the national park, and this part of the river is usually free of saltwater crocodiles: the only ones they say you'll see here are the relatively harmless freshwater variety. Although large saltwater crocs have been caught just a few kilometres upstream, there are several traps near the swimming area that will (hopefully) keep the killers at bay.

Other attractions in Katherine include the Katherine Museum, which was originally built in 1944-5 as an air terminal, but today houses an

Relaxing at Edith Falls

eclectic collection of artefacts, photographs, maps and farming displays. The Clyde Fenton Hangar houses the Gypsy Moth plane that belonged to Katherine's famous 'Flying Doctor', Clyde Fenton. There are also several art galleries in Katherine specialising in local art, although the best one is at the Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre on the southern outskirts of town. The not-for-profit centre hosts touring exhibitions of First Nations art, and the retail shop has a fabulous collection of original art and giftware.

There's no better way to end a long day on the road than with a soak and a float in Katherine Hot Springs. They may only be lukewarm rather than hot, but given that it's usually 30-something degrees outside nobody seems to care. Anywhere else in the world you'd have to pay to get wet in such an idyllic spot, but these are free, and they are only a short walk from the town centre. You'll find them right behind the Riverview Tourist Village. They are popular with locals after school and in the late afternoon but visit early in the morning and you'll have them all to yourself.

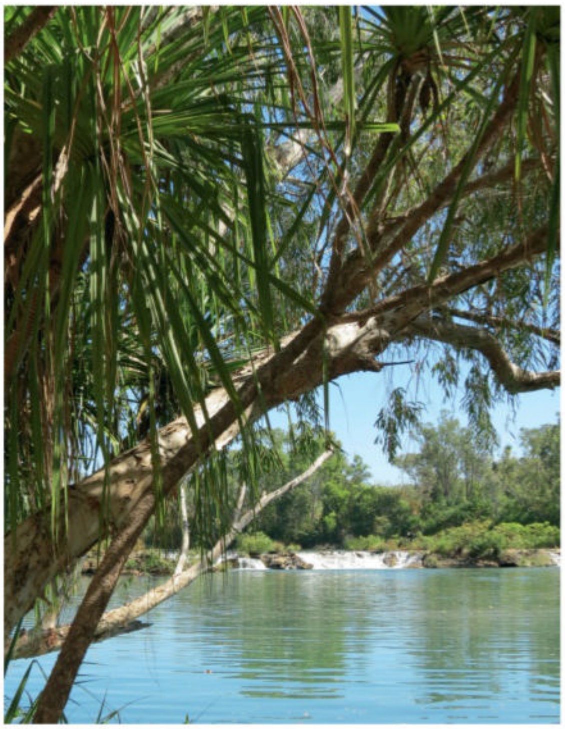
Another great spot to chill out in a warm pool is at Mataranka, a little more than an hour's drive south of Katherine on the Stuart Highway. Like those in Katherine, these thermal pools rise up from an underground spring at a temperature of around 34°C, which makes them more like a warm bath than a hot spring, but it's still a delightfully refreshing way to relax. The warm waters are widely believed to have mystical healing properties that soothe all aches

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Nitmiluk; Katherine's Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre; Boat cruise, Nitmiluk National Park; Katherine Helicopters, Nitmiluk.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Floating in Bitter Springs; Katherine Hot Springs; Kathleen Falls, Flora River Nature Park; Djarrung Falls, Flora River Nature Park; Northern nail-tail wallaby.

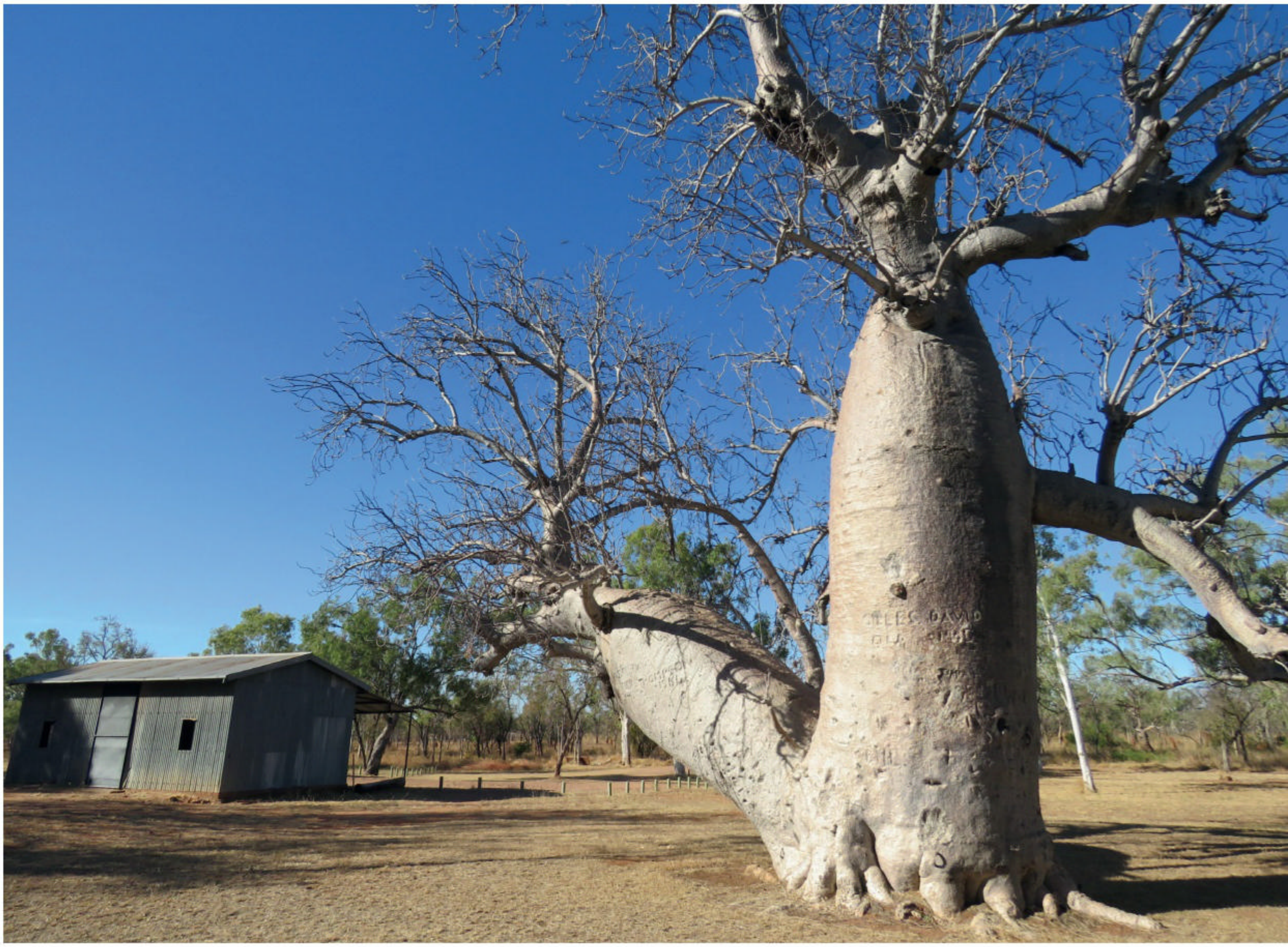
and pains. The sandy-bottomed ‘swimming pool’ is surrounded by a paperbark and palm forest with handrails and steps for easy access, and submerged seats to perch on; getting wet in the wild doesn’t get much easier than this! There are some equally delightful, but slightly less popular, pools at Bitter Springs, 2km up the track. Both pools are part of Elsey National Park. It’s on Mangarrayi and Yangman land, but is named after Elsey Station, which starred in the classic Australian novel *We of the Never Never* by Jeannie Gunn, who lived on the remote cattle property in 1902. There’s a replica of the original hand-hewn cypress pine Elsey homestead at the Mataranka Homestead Resort and the Elsey Cemetery contains the graves of several of the characters written about in the book. If you haven’t read it (or you want to revisit it) you can catch the 1982 movie in the bar at the homestead resort. It screens daily at noon during the dry season.

You’ll find a completely different kind of wild waterhole on the Flora River, 122km south-west of Katherine. Despite being easy to get to (as in. not



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) East Baines River, Judbarra/Gregory National Park; Humbert Track, Judbarra/Gregory National Park; Bullita Homestead, Judbarra/Gregory National Park.

very far off the main road and fine for 2WDs) the Flora River Nature Park seems to be one of those Top End places that's a bit of a local secret. The reserve's star attractions are its emerald springs, tufa dams and pretty waterfalls, and it's a fishing hot spot, particularly for those after barramundi. If you're lucky you may even catch a glimpse of the rather bizarre pig-nosed turtle, which lives in the river — look for its long piggy snout poking above the surface of the water. The plunge pool at the foot of Kathleen Falls would be perfect for swimming if it wasn't full of saltwater crocodiles. If you're set up for camping or travelling with a van, it's a splendid spot to camp. Just a short stroll from Kathleen Falls, the campground has large, shady campsites and hot showers, and rather inexplicably, given the location and facilities, few campers.



You don't need a 4WD to get to Flora River, but if you have one continue west on Victoria Highway to Judbarra/Gregory National Park. This huge park — the second largest in the Northern Territory — on the edge of the Kimberley covers an area of around 13,000 square kilometres, bridging tropical and semi-arid landscapes. Rich in both First Nations and European history, the park features spectacular range and gorge scenery, extensive stands of boab trees and some beautiful camping areas near waterholes, although don't be tempted to take the plunge — this is also prime saltwater crocodile country. Highlights include historic boabs carved with the names of explorers, Bullita Homestead — built in 1901, with traditional timber stockyards still standing — and Limestone Gorge, a shallow gorge set amongst unusual limestone formations and boab trees. Although you can get there in a 2WD, many of the roads inside the park are 4WD only, very rough, notoriously hard on tyres and not suitable for trailers, so best to unhitch and leave the trailer at camp.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Umbrawarra Gorge; Douglas River, Douglas Daly Holiday Park.

If you don't fancy tackling the gnarly tracks of Judbarra there's more beautiful gorge country to be found near the township of Pine Creek, around an hour's drive north of Katherine. But take a little sidetrack on the way to Leliyn (Edith Falls). On sealed road near the western boundary of Nitmiluk National Park and 60km north of Katherine, the paperbark and pandanus fringed natural plunge pool at the base of the falls is safe for swimming most of the year

Umbrawarra Gorge, a dusty corrugated 22km road trip south-west of Pine Creek, features a creek running through the middle of steep red cliffs forming a chain of swimming pools with sandy beaches. There's a walking track that starts at the campground and winds alongside the creek to a swimming hole, but if you want to explore the rest of the gorge you'll need to rock hop and be prepared for a bit of wading here and there. Best time to go is early in the dry season, as the creek stops flowing towards the end of the dry. It's an extraordinarily beautiful spot that seldom gets crowded — either the rough road puts most people off or they zoom past in their rush to get to Kakadu or Litchfield national parks.

If you are hoping to catch a barra, the Douglas Daly Holiday Park, halfway between Katherine and Darwin, is another great spot to stop (just don't confuse it with the town of Daly Waters, which is three hours south of Katherine, rather than north). Famous for its barramundi fishing — the Daly River is home to two of the country's biggest fishing competitions, the annual 'Barra Nationals' and 'Barra Classic' — the Douglas and Daly rivers also offer some good walks with several gorges to explore. One not to miss is Butterfly Gorge, named after the thousands of butterflies that shelter in its cool crevices. The park has comfortable rather than flash cabin accommodation as well as caravan and camping sites plus a swimming pool, licensed cafe and bar. Or head down the 4WD track to neighbouring Douglas River/Daly River Esplanade Conservation Area and bush camp beside the Douglas River in one of nine sites that are spread out over a couple of kilometres.

From Douglas Daly it's an easy two-and-a-half-hour-drive north to Darwin, although there's every chance you'll get seduced by the swimming holes and waterfalls of Litchfield National Park along the way. That's the thing about road tripping in the Top End — there's always another adventure waiting for you up the road.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) Kayaking, Nitmiluk National Park; Nitmiluk Cruise; Nabilil Dreaming Sunset Dinner Tour; Enjoying Mataranka Thermal Pool; Learning about bushtucker on a gorge tour with Nitmiluk Tours.

WHERE TO STAY

Cicada Lodge Nitmiluk National Park ***cicadalodge.com.au***
Knotts Crossing Resort, Katherine ***knottscrossing.com.au***
Territory Manor Motel & Caravan Park, Mataranka ***territorymanor.com.au***
Pine Creek Railway Resort, Pine Creek ***pinecreekrailwayresort.com.au***
Douglas Daly Holiday Park, Douglas Daly ***douglasdalypark.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Nitmiluk Café, Nitmiluk National Park ***nitmiluktours.com.au/dining/nitmiluk-cafe***
Cicada Lodge Restaurant, Nitmiluk National Park ***cicadalodge.com.au***
Finch Café, Katherine ***facebook.com/thefinchcafekatherine***
Mataranka Homestead, Mataranka, ***matarankahomestead.com.au***
Pine Creek Hotel, Pine Creek, ***pinecreekhotel.net***

WHAT TO DO

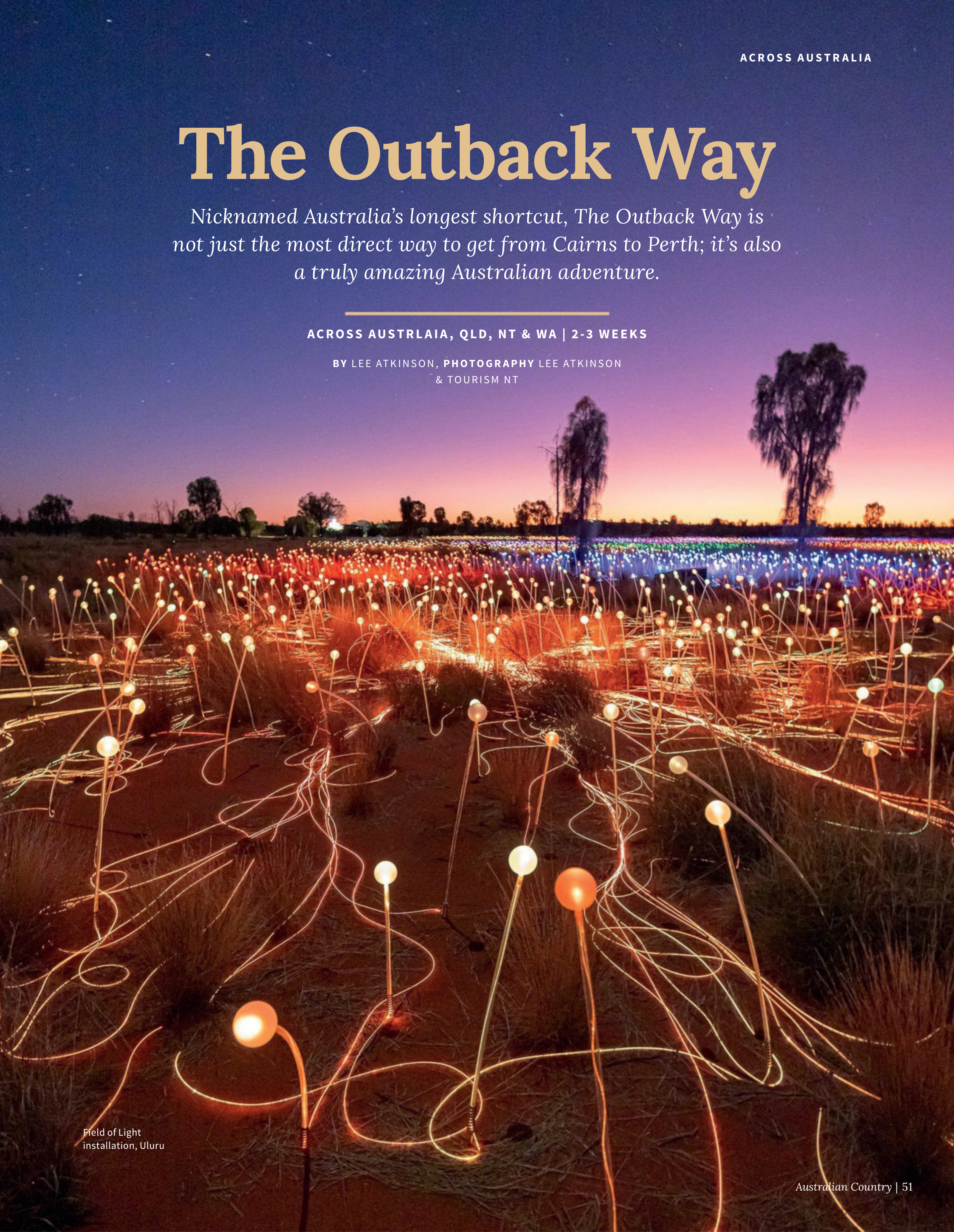
Nitmiluk Gorge cruises, Nitmiluk National Park ***nitmiluktours.com.au/gorge-experiences/gorge-tours***
Katherine Museum, Katherine ***katherinemuseum.com***
Godinymayin Yijard Rivers Arts and Culture Centre, Katherine ***gyracc.org.au***
Mataranka Thermal Pool, Elsey National Park ***nt.gov.au/parks/find-a-park/elsey-national-park***
Never Never Museum, Mataranka ***ropergulf.nt.gov.au/visit-us/arts-and-culture***
Fishing trips, Daly River ***ntfish4x4.com***

The Outback Way

Nicknamed Australia's longest shortcut, The Outback Way is not just the most direct way to get from Cairns to Perth; it's also a truly amazing Australian adventure.

ACROSS AUSTRLAIA, QLD, NT & WA | 2-3 WEEKS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM NT



Field of Light installation, Uluru

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Petermann Range on the Grand Central Road; Kings Canyon; Galahs, Boulia; Red-backed kingfisher; Porcupine Gorge.

One of the world's truly great trans-continental journeys, The Outback Way cuts a diagonal line across the country from Cairns, in tropical north Queensland, through the red centre, and south through the western deserts to Kalgoorlie and on to Perth. Traversing some of the most remote regions of Australia, it's off the radar for most Australian road trippers, even though you don't need a 4WD to access it (although an SUV with a bit of clearance will probably be more comfortable on the unsealed sections). You also don't have to camp because there's plenty of motel accommodation, there are lots of places to fuel up along the way and, as long as it hasn't been raining, it's fine for robust off-road caravans.

Not so much one road as a network of well-maintained dirt roads, such as the Great Central Road and the Plenty Highway, it's 4754km from Cairns to Perth via the Outback Way, and even though that seems mind-bogglingly long, it's actually around 1000km or so shorter compared to driving Highway 1 and other main roads between the two cities. Sizeable sections of the route are sealed — more than a third all up (around 1100km) — and more is being done every year. The whole thing should be a ribbon of blacktop by 2030, if all goes to plan and future governments honour their current funding commitments.

It might be the granddaddy of shortcuts, but with so many of the Australian icons such as Uluru, Kata Tjuta and Kings Canyon/Watarrka, and some of our most fascinating outback towns including Winton, Alice Springs/Mparntwe and Kalgoorlie on the route, this is not a road trip to do in a hurry.

It's also not a trip to do in your summer holidays. The temperature range is extreme, and travelling through the central deserts in summer can be dangerous and uncomfortable too, with flies in plague proportions. The best time to go is April through to October. Winter days may be warm, but nights (and early mornings) can be chilly, so take a warm jacket.

Although the Outback Way officially starts at Winton, if you are beginning in Cairns, head up over the range across the Atherton Tablelands to Ravenshoe, Queensland's highest town and home of Millstream Falls, the widest waterfall in the country. If you have time to spare, take a small detour to Undara to explore some of the world's

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Sunset in Boulia; Road to Ruby Gorge in the East Macdonnell Ranges; Arltunga.

longest lava tubes. These lava tubes, which extend more than 160km, were formed around 190,000 years ago when a large volcano erupted violently, spewing molten lava over the surrounding landscape. The lava, which has been estimated at 233 cubic kilometres, or enough to fill Sydney Harbour in just six days, flowed rapidly down a dry riverbed. The top outer layer cooled and formed a crust while the molten lava below drained outwards, leaving behind a series of hollow tubes. Undara's also a good place to overnight, but keep in mind that some tours do not operate during the Green Season (December through to April).

Head south on the Kennedy Development Road. The grassy Mitchell Plains of western Queensland can feel a bit flat and monotonous at times, so coming across Porcupine Gorge, a massive sandstone-walled canyon with a string of deep permanent waterholes at the bottom of it, around 60km north of Hughenden, is a welcome diversion. In some sections, the gorge is 150 metres deep. It is stunning after rain or late in the day when the reflections are at their best. There is a swimming hole at the base of the rock formation known as the Pyramid, but it's a bit of a steep walk back up (allow around 90 minutes return). An easier option is the 10-minute stroll to the lookout over the gorge.

From Hughenden, one of the stops on the Dinosaur Trail that winds through outback Queensland, it's around a four-hour drive to Winton, where attractions include the Waltzing Matilda Centre — the famous ballad was written and performed for the very first time in 1895 in Winton at the North Gregrory Hotel — the dinosaur stampede site at Lark Quarry and of course the fascinating Age of Dinosaurs Museum.

The road is sealed between Winton and Boulia and is a fairly easy drive across what seems like an ocean of golden Mitchell grass. There's not much to Boulia, other than a pub and a couple of houses, but it's famous for the mysterious Min Min lights which appear after dark — floating balls of light that are said to follow travellers for some kilometres before disappearing. Depending on who you ask — and everyone you meet in Boulia will have a Min Min story to tell — the lights are clouds of bioluminescent insects, flocks of fireflies, foxes' eyes, fluorescent gases, spirits or even UFOs. According to the legend, anyone who chases the light and manages to catch it will disappear. Learn all about them at the Min Min Encounter Centre,

where the aging animatronics, decked out in 1980s fashion, are so daggy they are good. There are also some very impressive fossilised Plesiosaurs hidden away in a room behind the Stonehouse Museum, part of the Boulia Heritage Complex.

It's a long and sometimes dusty drive between Boulia and Alice Springs/Mparntwe on the Plenty Highway but forget any notions of paved freeway — despite the rather grand name, it's mostly dirt and gravel, although it's usually in fairly good condition unless there has been recent rain. It's around 860km, so if you share the driving you can do this stretch in one very long day, but it's better to break the drive at one of the stations — Tobermorey, Jervois or Gemtree — along the way. All three offer camping and basic accommodation; Gemtree, which is closest to Alice Springs/Mparntwe, also has fossicking, gem-cutting displays and entertaining Camp Oven Dinner shows.

It's also worth allowing an extra day or two to explore the East MacDonnell Ranges (East Macs) and the gold rush ghost town of Arltunga on the way. And there's plenty to keep you in Alice Springs/Mparntwe for a few days; don't miss the Alice Springs Desert Park, a zoo, botanic garden and museum all wrapped up in one superb arid-

landscape park (alicespringsdesertpark.com.au). Another highlight is the old telegraph station beside the original Alice Springs waterhole, 4km north of town via the Stuart Highway. The Araluen Arts Centre has several galleries of Central Australian Aboriginal Art as well as one of the country's largest collection of works by Albert Namatjira. If you're here in September or October you can catch the annual Desert Mob exhibition. Just next door is the Museum of Central Australia.

There are two ways you can get to Yulara, which houses the resort complex closest to Uluru. The easy way is to head south from Alice Springs/Mparntwe on the Stuart Highway to Erldunda Roadhouse and then west on the Lasseter Highway. It's fully sealed and will take around five hours.

The scenic alternative is the Red Centre Way, also known as the Mereenie Loop Road through the gorges of the beautiful West MacDonnell Ranges/Tjoritja and Kings Canyon/Watarrka. It's unsealed for large sections, and to do it justice you really need to allow several days, but it's one of the country's most spectacular outback drives. Highlights include a number of waterholes framed by red, rocky gorge walls, including Ellery Creek Big Hole; Serpentine Gorge; the Ochre Pits, where Arrernte people have long mined ochre for ceremonies and trade; Ormiston Gorge; Glen Helen Gorge; and Redbank Gorge and the awe-inspiring Kings Canyon/Watarrka.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Ellery Creek Big Hole; Uluru; Sounds of Silence dinner at Ayers Rock Resort; Kata Tjuta.

Watching the setting sun, or the rising sun — most people do both — paint Uluru in a kaleidoscope of colours is one of the most memorable sights in the outback. It doesn't matter how many times you've seen it, it always takes your breath away. There's a huge variety of tours available from Ayers Rock Resort, including guided walks, stargazing tours, special breakfasts and dinners served outdoors in sight of the rock, camel rides and after-dark light shows such as the Field of Light — 50,000 glass blooms light up the desert in a stunning installation by artist Bruce Munro — and Wintjiri Wiru, a spellbinding retelling of the ancestral Mala story using more than a thousand drones as well as lasers, projections and sound in a spectacular choregraphed show.

Before you leave Yulara, allow at least half a day to do one of the walks at Kata Tjuta (The Olgas), which you'll drive right past as you head west on the Outback Way. This red dirt road between Yulara and Warburton via Kaltukatjara (Docker River) and Warakurna and can be very dusty and a bit bumpy in sections, but it's proof that you don't always need a four-wheel-drive to get off the beaten track — it's also being progressively sealed with new sections of bitumen added every year. Although it can look benign after rain when the countryside is speckled with delicate wildflowers, this is harsh country. Lots of people — explorers, gold diggers and adventurers — have died out here, including

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Maruku Arts Market Place; Gwalia.

Harold Bell Lasseter, of the 'lost reef of gold' fame. The cave where he sheltered for 21 days in the summer of 1931 before he perished is signposted just east of Kaltukatjara near the NT/WA border. Other highlights of this section of the trip include the stunning rocky ramparts of the weathered Petermann and Rawlinson ranges and the Schwerin Mural Crescent (another rocky range).

You're now in the heart of the western deserts — the Gibson Desert is to the north, Great Victoria Desert to the south — and each of the roadhouse stops have fabulous collections of Aboriginal art you can buy. Warakurna is also home to the Giles Weather Station, which was set up in 1956 to forecast weather conditions suitable for nuclear weapons testing and rocket testing programs at Woomera. You can watch the daily release of the weather balloon at 8.45am (CST South Australian time) from the weather station carpark, just up the hill from the roadhouse at Warakurna).The site was selected by legendary surveyor and road builder Len Beadell, who, with the help of his Gunbarrel Road Construction Party — which Beadell called the "Gunbarrel Bush Bashers" — bulldozed more than 6,500km of roads through virgin and sometimes unexplored territory in the centre of Australia to service the Woomera rocket range and Maralinga nuclear bomb test sites between 1947 and 1963. His grader, which trundled across more than 30,000km making these roads, is on display beside the weather station, which is open for self-guided tours during business hours and features original murals painted by Beadell, a talented cartoonist, on the walls.

Almost every small community between Alice Springs/Mparntwe and Kalgoorlie has a First Nations art gallery or co-operative art centre. Some sell direct to the travelling public and others to commercial galleries in the cities, but Tjulyuru Regional Arts Gallery in the tiny community of Warburton — home to a roadhouse with a few motel units, a caravan park and not much else — was set up in 1989 by the Ngaanyatjarra people to collect and retain the best works of local artists rather than selling them, as a way to help keep their culture strong.

Fast forward three decades and there are now more than 1000 contemporary works in the impressive museum and gallery space, the largest collection of First Nations art under the direct ownership of Aboriginal people in the country. It's also one of the most remote galleries — the nearest big town, Kalgoorlie, is 900km to the south-west and Alice Springs/Mparntwe is 1000km away in the other direction. There are around 900 paintings in the collection, but it's the large textile pieces and contemporary art glass — produced in a kiln onsite — that really steal the show, including glass bowls and large panels featuring traditional designs originally drawn in sand before being transformed into glass.

Laverton's officially the end of the Outback Way, although most people continue on to Kalgoorlie and beyond to Perth, with the road sealed all the way. Before you leave Laverton, take a stroll around the unrestored historic heart of the old mining town and spend some time at the Great Beyond Visitors Centre and Explorers Hall of Fame, which has lots of First Nations and pioneer artefacts on display and also serves the best coffee west of Uluru.

Just an hour or so down the road is the beautifully preserved ghost town of Gwalia, established in the 1890s. When the Sons of Gwalia Mine — once one of the largest gold mines in the country — closed in 1963, the population shrunk

from 1200 to less than 40 in just three weeks. As you wander through deserted streets full of grand old buildings and into abandoned houses that seem snap-frozen in time, it's easy to imagine that the residents have simply left home for the day. The first mine manager was a young American engineer named Herbert Hoover, who later became the 31st President of the United States, and you can visit his house (which is also a B&B), peer into the open-cut mine and wander through more than 18 houses, mine offices and old shops. The Gwalia Museum tells the story of the town's boom and bust (and a little tip: it is pronounced *Gworlia*, not *Gwarlia*).

Menzies, 106km south of Gwalia, is also a ghost of its former self. In 1905 it had a bustling population of 10,000, thanks to the gold rush that was in full swing at the time, and it's now just one of several semi-deserted towns littered throughout the goldfields, although it has fared better than most with many stately buildings remaining, including the town hall, with its 8.5-metre-high clock tower, and railway station. The atmospheric cemetery, where many of the tombstones are made of tin, provides a sobering glimpse into just how harsh life was here on the goldfields.

Lake Ballard, a large white salt lake in an otherwise featureless semi-desert near the tiny township of Menzies, 132km north of Kalgoorlie, is home to one of the country's most intriguing and otherworldly art installations. Here, scattered across the vast saltpan, flickering in the midday heat like a mirage, are 51 spectral sculptures of people — the work of internationally renowned artist Antony Gormley. Gormley made laser body-scans of 51 of the Menzies locals and then made casts life-size in height but two-thirds in width. The resulting stick-like statues, now rusted and pocked by the harsh salt air, are scattered over 10 square kilometres

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Gormley's statues, Lake Ballard; Ormiston Gorge, West Macdonnell Ranges; Tjulyuru Gallery, Warburton; Tali Wiru dining experience, Ayers Rock Resort.

of the lake, each one standing alone about 750m apart from its neighbour so that wherever you turn, there's another on the horizon. Gormley called it Inside Australia. It's spooky and eerie, and once you are out on the saltpan everything seems to shimmer, shimmy and shake in the heat haze.

Kalgoorlie is around a 90-minute drive from Menzies. Gold was first discovered in this region in 1892, and in a few months the rush was in full swing, with thousands of men swarming to the outback to try their luck. The towns along this stretch — Kalgoorlie–Boulder, Coolgardie and Southern Cross — are full of grand gold-rush era buildings that testify to the riches that were found. In Kalgoorlie, keep an eye out for the statue of Paddy Hannan on the corner opposite the Kalgoorlie Hotel. After he and his mates Tom Flanagan and Daniel Shea were forced to camp out when their horse lost a shoe, they stumbled across some alluvial gold nuggets, sparking the gold rush to beat all other gold rushes.

Western Australia still supplies the vast majority of Australia's total gold production. A lot of it is dug from the ground along Kalgoorlie's Golden Mile, which has more than 3000km of old underground workings and has yielded more than 49,000,000 ounces of gold so far. You can see the workings of the modern-day mining industry from the lookout over the Super Pit on the outskirts of Kalgoorlie. Australia's largest open pit gold mine is 3km long, 1.4km wide and 330m deep, and makes the huge trucks that carry the ore — which are more than 6m high and 7m wide — look like teeny, tiny toys.

It's almost 600km from Kalgoorlie to Perth, through the wheatbelt and goldfields, following, for much of the drive, the Goldfields Pipeline. An incredible feat of engineering, the pipeline was the vision of Charles Yelverton O'Connor, Chief Engineer of Western Australia from 1891 to 1902, who managed what many people considered was impossible — pumping 22,700 cubic metres of water from Mundaring Weir near Perth, lifting it 355m using only eight pumping stations, and delivering it to the thirsty goldfield towns 600km away. Sadly, both the pipeline and his work were subjected to prolonged criticism and scepticism by parliament and the press, and he took his own life in March, 1902 — just before the water was turned on.

By the time you reach Perth, there's a good chance you'll have seen wild camels lope across the horizon, been stared at by belligerent emus, watched by wary kangaroos and screamed at by what sounds like a million cockatoos. More than likely you'll have seen sunsets that set the sky alight, peered over the rim of dizzyingly deep canyons, floated in icy water, hiked into gorges where mythical beasts are said to sleep and gazed up into night skies so full of stars that it's hard to find the spaces between the lights. The Outback Way is definitely epic.

You need two Aboriginal Community permits to drive the Outback Way — one to travel between Laverton to WA/NT Border from the Department of Indigenous Affairs (08 6551 8024) and another from the Central Land Council to travel the NT section of the road from the border to Yulara (08 8951 6320). ***clc.org.au***

You'll also need a permit if you drive the Mereenie Loop Road, from Alice Springs to Kings Canyon. Pick one up at the visitor centre in Alice Springs or the Kings Canyon Service Station if you're coming from the west.

The longest distance between fuel stops is 300km, between Laverton and Tjukayirla Roadhouse, but carry extra fuel as sometimes roadhouses in First Nations communities are closed for cultural reasons.

WHERE TO STAY

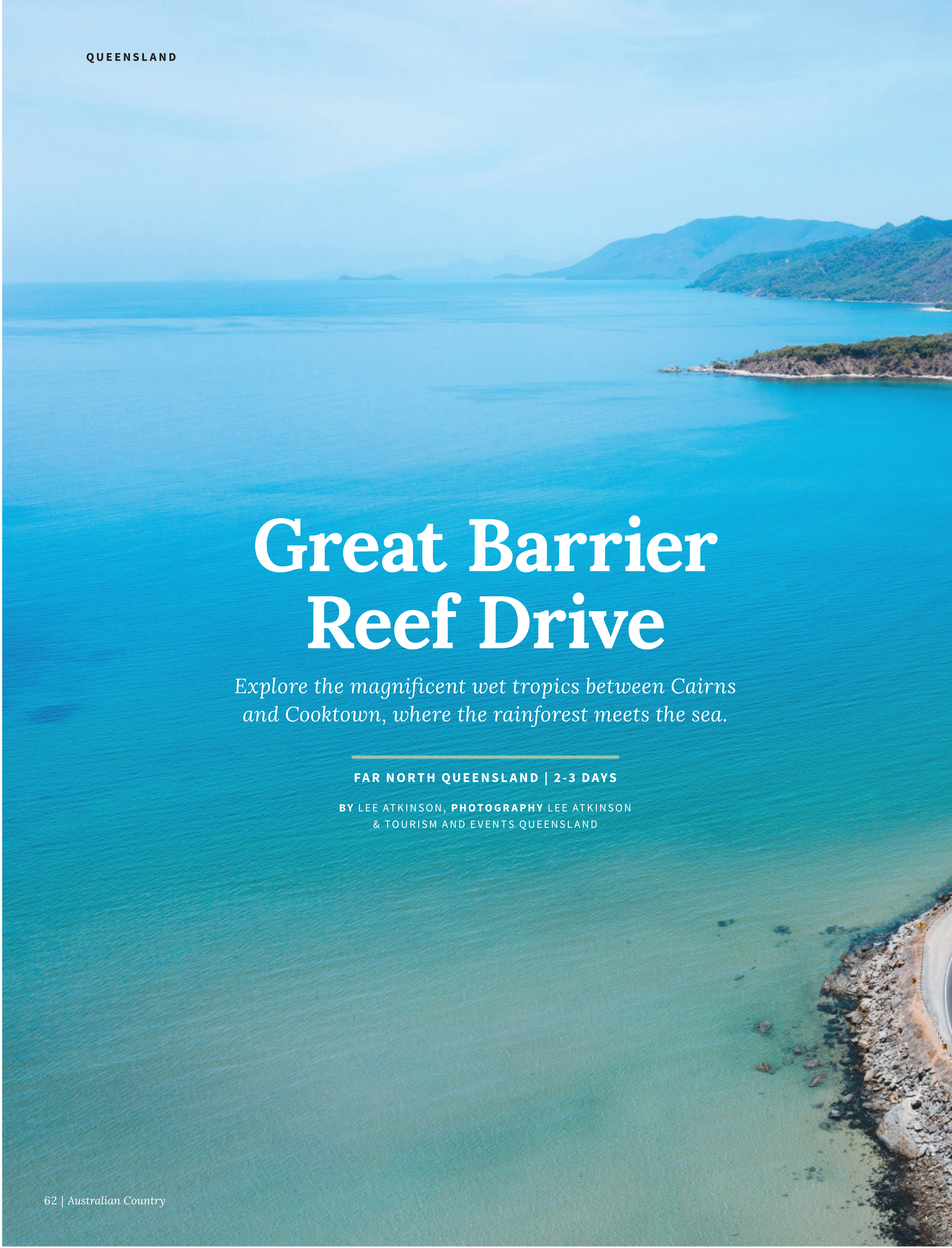
Undara Holiday Park, Mount Surprise ***discoveryholidayparks.com.au***
North Gregory Hotel, Winton ***northgregoryhotel.com***
Desert Sands Motel, Boulia ***desertsandsmotel.com.au***
Gemtree Caravan Park, Anmatjere ***gemtree.com.au***
Desert Palms, Alice Springs ***desertpalms.com.au***
Discovery Resorts - Kings Canyon, ***discoveryholidayparks.com.au/resorts/kings-canyon***
Ayers Rock Resort, Yulara, ***ayersrockresort.com.au***
Warakurna Roadhouse, Warakurna ***warakurnaroadhouse.com.au***
Tjukayirla Roadhouse, Wartburton ***tjukayirlaroadhouse.com.au***
Hoover House B&B, Gwalia ***gwalia.org.au***
Quest Yelverton Kalgoorlie ***questapartments.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Tattersalls Hotel, Winton ***facebook.com/Tattshotelwinton***
Australian Hotel, Boulia ***facebook.com/australianhotelboulia***
Hanuman Restaurant, Alice Springs ***hanuman.com.au/alice-springs-1***
Sounds of Silence, Yulara ***ayersrockresort.com.au***
Balcony Bar and Restaurant, Kalgoorlie ***palacehotelkalgoorlie.com***

WHAT TO DO

Undara Lava Tubes, Mount Surprise ***parks.desi.qld.gov.au/parks/undara-volcanic***
Waltzing Matilda Centre, Winton ***matildacentre.com.au***
Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum, Winton ***australianageofdinosaurs.com***
Dinosaur Stampede National Monument, Lark Quarry ***dinosaurtrackways.com.au***
Min Min Encounter Centre, Boulia ***boulia.qld.gov.au/tourism/min-min-encounter-tourist-centre***
Boulia Heritage Complex, Boulia ***boulia.qld.gov.au/boulia-heritage-complex***
Arltunga Historical Reserve, East MacDonnell Ranges ***nt.gov.au/parks/find-a-park/arltunga-historical-reserve***
Trephina Gorge Nature Park, East MacDonnell Ranges ***nt.gov.au/parks/find-a-park/trephina-gorge-nature-park***
Alice Springs Desert Park, Alice Springs ***alicespringsdesertpark.com.au***
Alice Springs Telegraph Station, Alice Springs ***alicespringstelegraphstation.com.au***
Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs ***araluenartscentre.nt.gov.au***
Museum of Central Australia, Alice Springs ***araluenartscentre.nt.gov.au/museum-central-australia***
Warakurna Artists, Warakurna ***warakurnaartists.com.au***
Tjulyuru Gallery, Warburton ***warburtonroadhouse.com.au/attractions***
Gwalia Ghost Town & Museum, Gwalia ***gwalia.org.au/***
Museum of the Goldfields, Kalgoorlie ***kalgoorlietourism.com/museum-of-the-goldfields***
Super Pit Lookout, Kalgoorlie, ***superpit.com.au/community/lookout***
Hannans North Tourist Mine, Kalgoorlie ***hannansnorth.com.au***



Great Barrier Reef Drive

Explore the magnificent wet tropics between Cairns and Cooktown, where the rainforest meets the sea.

FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND | 2-3 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND

Great Barrier Reef
Drive Cairns

There are two main reasons that thousands of visitors head to Tropical North Queensland each year: the rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef. You can explore them both — with or without a four-wheel-drive — on this road trip from Cairns to Cooktown.

With so many great things to see and do in and around Cairns — reef trips, rainforest skyways, heritage train trips, island hopping, shopping, visiting museums, art galleries and the aquarium, eating out or even just lazing around the swimming lagoon on the promenade — it can be tempting to spend your whole holiday in Cairns (and no one would blame you if you did) but there are even better things waiting for you just up the road.

This road trip to Cooktown starts with a choice. There are two ways to head north from Cairns to hook up with the Mulligan Highway: by the sea or through the hinterland, and both are stunning trips. If you are prone to FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), you can always make it a loop and do both.

The coastal way, officially called the Captain Cook Highway but branded as the Great Barrier Reef Drive, is a 67km stretch of curvy bitumen that runs north of Cairns to Port Douglas. It's one of the most picturesque coastal roads in the country, proving that it doesn't have to be a long road trip to be a great one. It hugs the coastline almost the entire way, with one eye-stretching sea view unfurling after another, and there are plenty of places to pull over and admire the scenery along the way, including Rex Lookout, around 56km north of Cairns, which looks out over Trinity Bay.

A highlight is Mossman Gorge, a beautiful boulder-strewn river gorge in dense rainforest 20km north of Port Douglas. The Mossman Gorge Centre offers easy access to the gorge, with shuttles departing every 10 minutes from the car park, as well as a cafe, Indigenous art gallery and gift shop. There are two Dreamtime Gorge Walks on Kuku Yalanji land, run by First Nations guides. The walks start with a traditional smoking ceremony that cleanses and wards off bad spirits before participants meander through the rainforest and take in traditional huts or humpies, a swim in a waterhole and, at the end, bush tea and damper.

The rainforest meets the sea at Cape Tribulation in the Daintree rainforest, believed to be one of the oldest forests in the world, 64km north of Mossman. The road to the cape is sealed, but you'll need to take the ferry across the Daintree River. If you're road tripping in a hire car, check the fine print of your rental contract because some companies will not allow their vehicles to cross the Daintree River, and keep in mind that the roads north of the cape are narrow and winding, not recommended

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Great Barrier Reef, Cairns; see saltwater crocodiles on a Daintree River Cruise; Mossman Gorge; Cape Tribulation Beach.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Daintree Discovery Centre; Jindalba Boardwalk, Daintree National Park; Boyd's forest dragon; Daintree Rainforest.

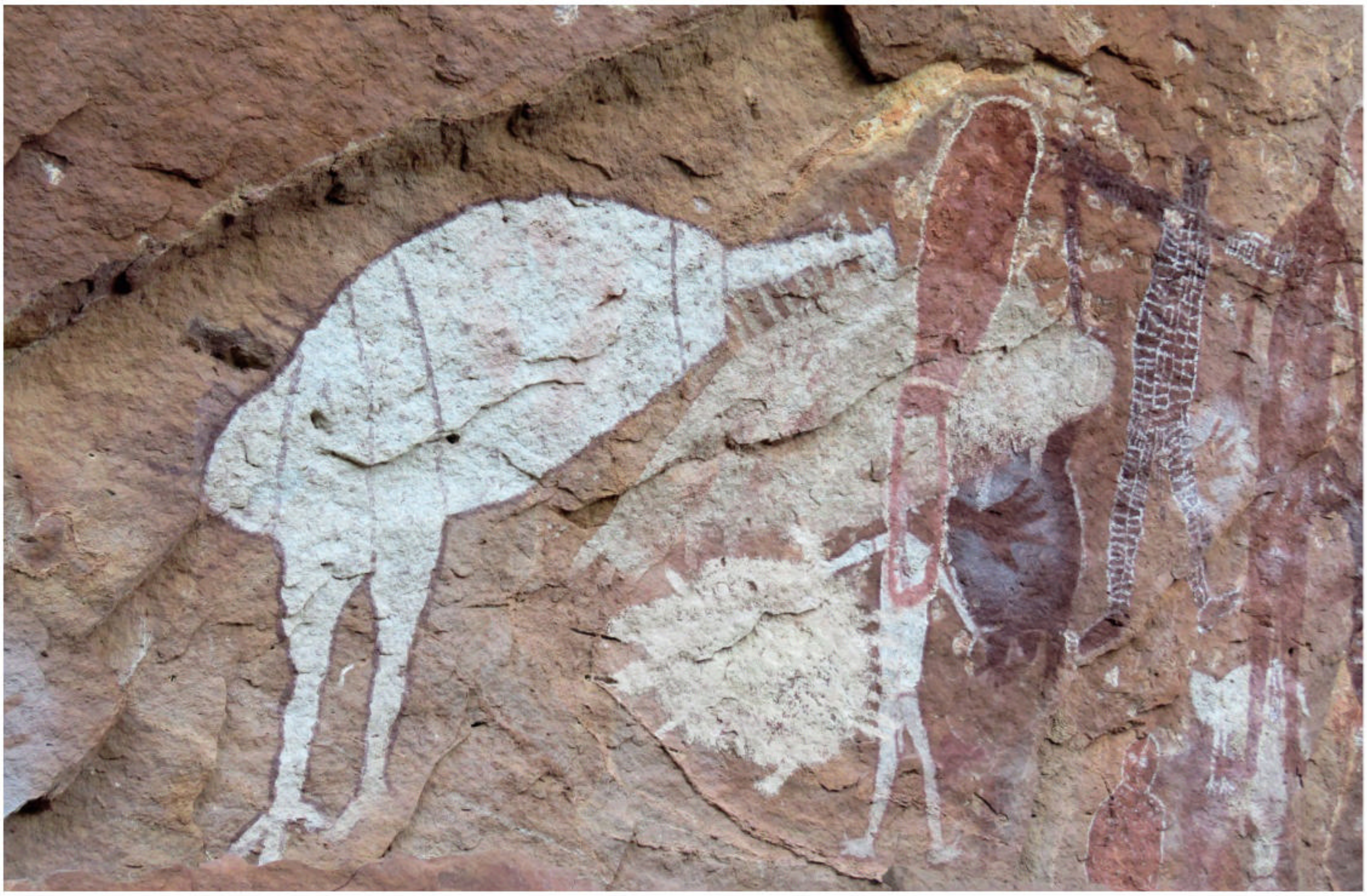
for caravans and may be closed after heavy rain. If you're in a hire car that has restrictions, towing a van or nervous about driving on unsealed roads, you can still drive to Cooktown, but you'll need to go the inland way via the sealed, inland route, aka the Mulligan Highway, via Lakeland and Mount Molloy, and you'll need to backtrack down to Shannonvale, between Mossman and Port Douglas.

But if you do take the ferry across the Daintree River there are four wheelchair-accessible boardwalks through the rainforest and mangroves, all of which include interpretation boards; these are a great way to explore the wet forests and swamps without getting your feet wet. The Dubuji and Kulki boardwalks lead out to beautiful Myall Beach. Swimming is not recommended, however, as saltwater crocodiles live in the park's creeks and nearby coastal waters; take a Daintree River Cruise and you're pretty much guaranteed to see several.

The alternative, slightly more direct way north to Cooktown is to climb straight into the mountains from Cairns, via a series of tight, twisting switchback turns through the World Heritage–listed rainforest up to Kuranda and Mareeba, where the countryside opens out into fields of sugarcane, paddocks of macadamia and mango trees, and exotic orchards laden with strange-looking fruit.

This is also coffee country: almost all of Australia's coffee is grown in the Mareeba area. Skybury coffee plantation has a terrific cafe — taste some of their delicious own-grown coffee on the deck, which has views that seem to stretch forever, or learn about how the coffee is roasted at Coffee Works in Mareeba.

The township of Atherton is a short 33km detour south of Mareeba. One hundred years ago, this sleepy little town had a flourishing Chinatown that had sprung up during the 19th century gold rushes. Today, the only sign of this once thriving community of more than 1100 is the small timber and iron Hou Wang Temple, built in 1903, that somehow managed to survive while all around it buildings were demolished and carted away for scrap. It's now protected by the National Trust and houses a very good museum crammed with innovative, interactive displays and artefacts. Free guided tours run on demand and are well worth the hour or so it takes to explore the old Chinatown area and the interior of the temple, which is still fitted



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Jarramali Rock Art Tour, Laura; Cooktown from Grassy Hill Lookout; tropical blooms and the Endeavour River, Cooktown.

out with the original elaborate carvings, bell and metal vessels brought from China last century.

Continue north through the township of Mount Molloy and on towards the Palmer River Roadhouse, where prospector James Venture Mulligan found 102 ounces of gold in 1872, sparking a ten-year gold rush that eventually led to permanent settlement in the area and, 133 years later, the naming of a new highway. If you need sustenance, the roadhouse serves a killer hamburger, or keep going the extra 48km to Lakeland, which also brews up its own very good, locally grown coffee.

It's a little bit of a detour, but one of Australia's, and the world's, best collections of prehistoric rock paintings is also one of the least known. Located near the tiny township of Laura, around 60km north-west of Lakeland, the Quinkan Galleries include artworks painted 15,000-40,000 years ago. One of the most accessible sites is at Split Rock, just a few kilometres east of town. There are three galleries here, connected by a boardwalk, that encompass paintings of flying foxes and the bizarre, spiteful tall spirits with knobbly knees and bent limbs, the Quinkans. There's not a lot of interpretive information at the site, so it helps if you call into the Quinkan and Regional Cultural Centre first. It's an excellent information centre-cum-museum, with all sorts of artefacts, films and recorded oral histories. Opening hours vary, so call ahead to check they are available.

It's about 80km to Cooktown from Lakeland, but take a small 4km detour off the Mulligan Highway down the coast road (look out for the signs for the Bloomfield Track around 25km south of Cooktown; although the track is 4WD, this first section of it is fine for 2WD and caravans) to drop into the Lions Den Hotel — you can't miss it. It's the only thing there! Built in 1875 at the height of the gold rush, this historic hotel, knocked together with scraps of wood and iron, is full of quirky decorations and walls adorned with visitors' signatures. They also serve a very good burger. From the Lions Den, it's an easy 20-minute drive to Cooktown.

A sleepy, half-forgotten type of place yet to really burst onto the tourist trail, Cooktown still has a last-frontier feel to it. It's also the only place in Australia where Captain Cook and his crew spent an extended period of time ashore. Back in 1770 Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, ran afoul of the Great Barrier Reef, damaging its hull near the place now known as Cape Tribulation. It was sink or swim, and Cook needed to find safe waters, fast, so he sailed his damaged vessel into the closest river he could find and set up camp at what is now known as Cooktown for seven weeks while he repaired his ship. Cook's landing site on the banks of the Endeavour River

MUNGURRU

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Cooktown; Walkabout Cultural Adventures; Daintree River; Wujal Wujal (Bloomfield) Falls; Cape Tribulation Beach House; Grassy Hill Lighthouse, Cooktown.

in the centre of town is marked with a plaque and statue commemorating the famed navigator.

Housed in an historic convent, the Cooktown Museum might look small from the outside but it is worth a few hours of your time. Here you'll find a large collection of Guugu Yimithiir — the traditional owners of the land around Cooktown — artefacts and learn about the first recorded interactions between the Guugu Yimithirr people and Cook. Also on display is the original anchor and canon from *HMB Endeavour*, salvaged in the 1970s, and exhibits relating to the Queensland gold rush.

Take a stroll through the beautiful Botanic Gardens in Walker Street. Established in 1878, they are one of the oldest in the state. The historic cemetery on Boundary Street is also good for a wander. Informative plaques recount the history and stories of some of the people buried here, and there's also a large shrine dedicated to the many Chinese who died here during the Palmer River gold rush of the 1870s.

The developers haven't yet found the road to Cooktown, but they will. Go now before everyone else does.

TAKE THE WILD WAY HOME

If you've got a 4WD and want to get off the beaten track, take the Bloomfield Track back to Port Douglas. This is the controversial road that was blazed through the Daintree Rainforest back in the 1980s, provoking protests, blockades and several arrests, and ultimately led to the Daintree being proclaimed a World Heritage site, despite opposition by the Queensland government at the time. Today, it makes for an exciting trip, with lots of creek crossings and steep climbs, and plenty of opportunity to get stuck if it has been wet. A highlight is Wujal Wujal (Bloomfield Falls), which are at their best after rain or very early in the dry season, when a thundering torrent spills over a basin-like cliff into the river. They are on Kuku Yalanji land, and guided cultural tours are available. You've also got a good chance of seeing cassowaries foraging beside the road or darting into the rainforest as you drive past.

WHERE TO STAY

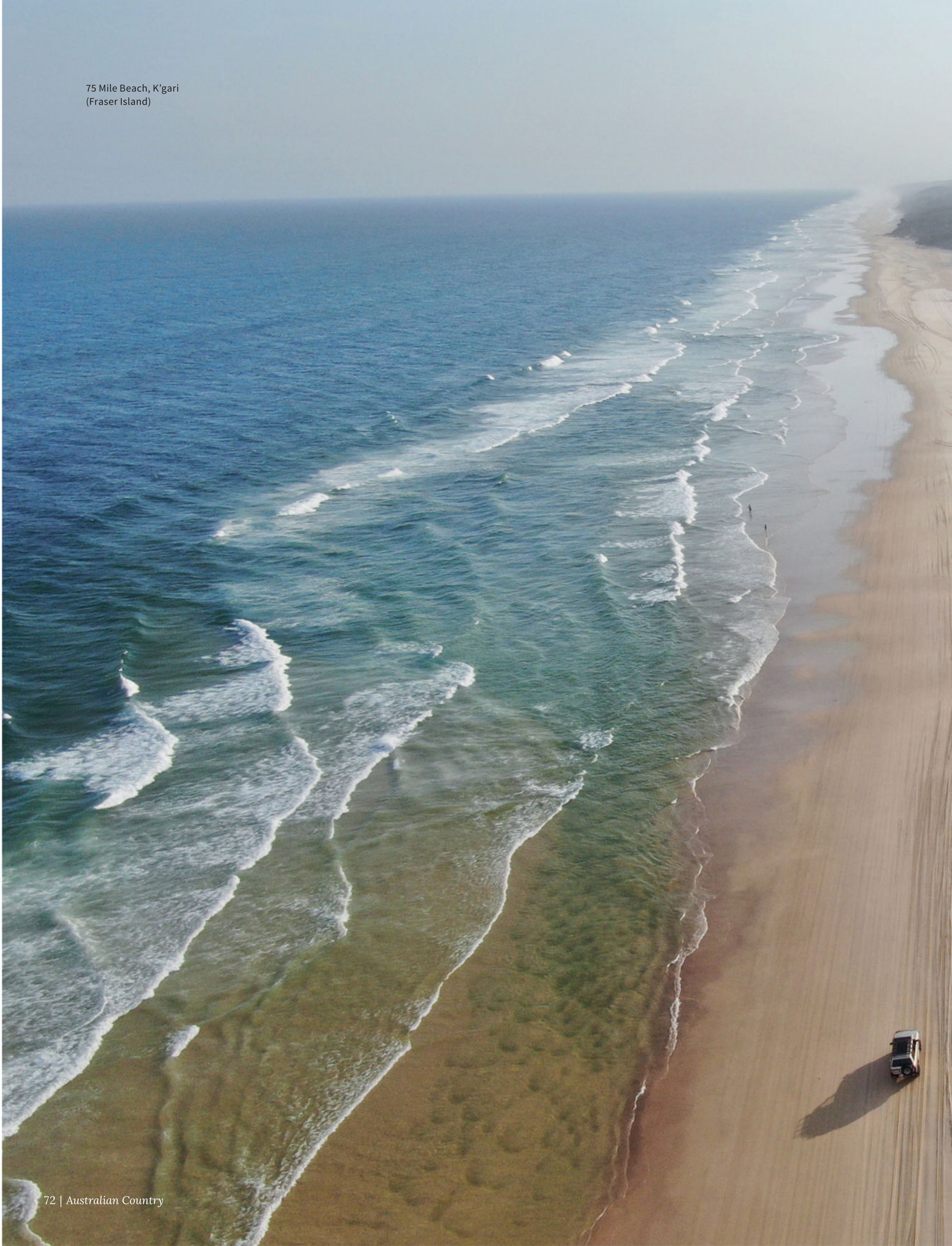
The Riley, Cairns ***crystalbrookcollection.com/riley***
Thala Beach Nature Reserve, Oak Beach ***thalabeach.com.au***
Silky Oaks Lodge, Mossman ***silkyoakslodge.com.au***
Cape Trib Beach House, Cape Tribulation ***capetribbeach.com.au***
Sovereign Resort Hotel, Cooktown ***sovereignresort.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Ochre Restaurant, Cairns ***ochrerestaurant.com.au***
The Pier Bar, Carins ***thepierbar.com.au***
Hemmingway's Brewery, Cairns ***hemingwaysbrewery.com/cairns-wharf***
Coffee Works, Mareeba ***coffeeworks.com.au/coffee-works-mareeba***
Skybury Café & Roastery, Mareeba ***skybury.com.au***
Nautilus, Port Douglas ***nautilus-restaurant.com.au***
The Lions Den Hotel, Helenvale ***lionsdenhotel.net.au***
Balcony Restaurant, Cooktown ***sovereignresort.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Great Barrier Reef trips, Cairns & Port Douglas ***tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au/things-to-do/great-barrier-reef-ocean***
Rusty's Markets, Cairns ***rustysmarkets.com.au***
Cairns Aquarium, Cairns ***cairnsaquarium.com.au***
Wildlife Habitat Port Douglas ***wildlifehabitat.com.au***
Mossman Gorge, Mossman ***mossmangorge.com.au***
Daintree River Cruise, Daintree Village ***daintreerivercruisecentre.com.au***
Hou Wang Temple, Atherton ***nationaltrustqld.org.au/visitor-sites/Hou-Wang-Chinese-Temple-and-Museum***
Quinkan and Regional Cultural Centre, Laura ***anggnarra.org.au***
Cooktown Museum, Cooktown ***nationaltrustqld.org.au/visitor-sites/Cooktown-Museum***
Wujal Wujal Cultural Tours ***wujalwujalcouncil.qld.gov.au/visit***



75 Mile Beach, K’gari
(Fraser Island)

Great Beach Drive

One of the longest beach drives in the world and about as close as you can get to the sea in four wheels without getting wet.

SUNSHINE COAST, QLD | 3-5 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON
& TOURISM AND EVENTS QUEENSLAND

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from right) Rainbow Beach; Double Island Point; Rainbow Beach; The Coloured Sands.

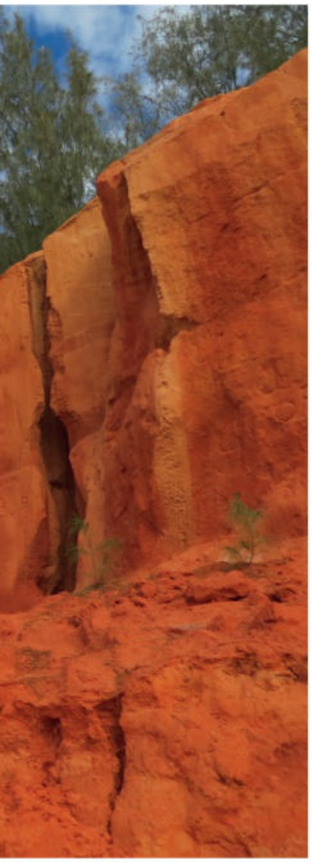
The Great Beach Drive between Noosa's north shore, Rainbow Beach and beyond to K'gari (Fraser Island) trumps all other coastal highways when it comes to scenic seaside drives because this road is actually on the beach. Throw in one of Australia's most spectacular World Heritage-listed wilderness areas — the rainforest and beautiful freshwater lakes and streams of K'gari — as well as one of the country's best whale-watching spots and you have all the reasons you need to hit the road — or beach, in this case.

A bonus for those in a hurry is that the beach drive knocks about an hour off the travel time from Noosa to Rainbow Beach compared to taking the Bruce Highway, which has to make it one of Australia's best shortcuts. You can do the Noosa to Rainbow Beach section in half a day but to do the full Great Beach Drive all the way to the top of K'gari, you really need between three and five days. With scenery this special, this is not a road trip you want to do in a rush — it really is all about the journey rather than the destination.

Summer is the most popular time to hit the beach, and it can get busy on sunny weekends. It may not be swimming weather, but winter is a great time to do this trip: whale-watching season is June through to November and the best time to see them is August, September and October, when they are heading back south to Antarctica with their calves. But whatever time of year you go, you don't have to worry about timing your drive to beat rush hour because on the Great Beach Drive it's the tide, not traffic tailbacks you have to worry about — the notorious Mudlo Rocks just south of Rainbow Beach township is infamous for wrecking an average of 40 4WDs each year, their drivers left stranded by a combination of soft sand and rapidly rising seawater.

The fun begins almost as soon as you drive off the little ferry at Tewantin near Noosa Heads (135km north of Brisbane). This is the time and place to air down your tyres — reducing the pressure to around 20 psi will give you a lot more traction when driving in sand — because the street turns to sand just up the road.

There's no line markings or overtaking lanes — in fact there's not even a track, but it is actually a designated road. All the usual road rules apply, including speed limits: 80km/hour on the beach, 50km/hour along beach camping areas. There are also a whole lot of other hazards that you



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) Teewah Beach, Cooloola, Great Sandy National Park; Freshwater Track, Cooloola, Great Sandy National Park; Inskip Point; Carlo Sand Blow, Rainbow Beach.

normally don't have to worry about too much on a normal highway, like kids building sandcastles and teenagers sunbaking in the middle of the road and vehicles parked pretty much anywhere their owners feel like it.

But don't let this put you off. This is a great on-the-beach drive for first timers — it's challenging enough to be exciting but as long as you travel at low tide and keep your air pressure low you're not too likely to get into trouble, and if you do there are plenty of people around to help you out. The only really tricky bits are the sometimes soft and bumpy sand ramps that lead on and off the beach. If you've never driven on sand before and are feeling nervous, there are lots of places you can sign up for some lessons before you go: google '4WD sand driving courses'.

Teewah Beach, part of the Cooloola Recreation Area in Great Sandy National Park, extends some 50 or so sandy wave-washed kilometres to Double Island Point. It's a bit of an uphill walk, but the views from the lookout beside the iron lighthouse, built in 1884, are worth the slog, particularly in winter when you may just be treated to a dazzling show of breaching, blowing, tail slapping and spy-hopping from passing humpback whales.

Other highlights include a large tidal lake and Rainbow Beach's famous, although slightly misnamed, coloured sands — they are actually sandy cliffs coloured by iron oxides in, if you believe the locals, 72 different shades of red, yellow, orange, ochre and rust.

To get to the township of Rainbow Beach, leave the beach at Freshwater Camping Area and wind your way along the sandy roller coaster track over the vegetated dunes through the rainforest, past stands of satinay (turpentine), kauri and strangler figs, and dense pockets of piccabeen palms.

Don't miss a walk across Carlo Sand Blow, a massive slow-moving sand dune that towers over Rainbow Beach and is one of the largest piles of wind-blown sand on the Queensland coast. With views of Rainbow Beach and the coloured sands in one direction, across to K'gari and west to Tin Can Bay in the other, it's hard to imagine a better spot to watch the sun go down — or come up, depending on the time of day you get there.

The Great Beach Drive continues north along Rainbow Beach to Inskip Point, where you can catch the barge for a 10-minute trip across to K'gari for yet more sand-under-the-wheels motoring.

Smothered in rainforest that shelters beautiful freshwater lakes and trickling streams, and

encircled by beautiful stretches of white sandy beach, getting back to nature is easy on K'gari as almost all of the island is national park.

At 123km long and 22km wide, it's officially the largest sand island in the world. There are no roads — just a network of sandy 4WD tracks and the famous 75 Mile Beach, which runs the length of the island's eastern coast and does double duty as the island's main highway during low tide.

Beyond the beach you can explore the island by 4WD, visiting magical spots such as Pile Valley, and the Valley of the Giants, home to some of the world's tallest rainforest trees, is a great adventure. The sandy tracks that criss-cross the island can be a little more challenging than the relatively smooth run along the beach, and you'll need a high-clearance 4WD — all-wheel-drive vehicles are not suitable. Most of the inland tracks are wide enough for just one vehicle, so you will need to pull over frequently to let oncoming traffic pass — those downhill should give way. Go mid-week for less traffic. If you'd rather let someone else worry about the driving there are plenty of 4WD tours available.

A highlight of most people's time on K'gari, though, is floating in water so clear that it's practically invisible. One of the most popular sites is Lake McKenzie, an almost perfectly circular perched lake — which means it's fed only by rainwater — ringed with dazzling white sand. Gin-clear when

you're floating in it, implausibly bright blue from a distance, it's the type of place that you'd swear is a photo-shopped fake until you've seen it in real life. Swimming here is divine, and it's the perfect spot for a leisurely picnic lunch. Other top spots to get wet include Lake Wabby (the deepest lake on the island) at the advancing edge of the Hammerstone Sandblow and Eli Creek, another clear-as-glass freshwater creek that winds through the rainforest — walk the boardwalk then float down with the current to the beach. The wreck of the Maheno lies slowly deteriorating on the water's edge just a few kilometres farther up the beach. The trans-Tasman liner, bound for a Japanese wrecking yard, was driven ashore during a cyclone in 1935.

Keep going along the beach until you get to Waddy Point at the northern tip of Ocean Beach, where you'll be greeted with great views and you can often see sea turtles, sharks and stingrays in the water below. Champagne Pools, where the surf crashes over a series of rock walls into calm but bubbly rock pool below the headland, is another popular swimming spot.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Champagne Pools, K'gari; wreck of the Maheno; Lake McKenzie, K'gari; Pile Valley, K'gari.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Humpback whale; Eli Creek; Kingfisher Bay jetty, K'gari; Dining at Kingfisher Bay Resort; Dingo.

Stretch your legs on one of the walking trails. The big one is the 90km Fraser Island Great Walk but if that sounds a little hardcore, there are dozens of day walks — a circuit of Lake McKenzie or the hike across the sand dunes from Lake Wabby to Ocean Beach are two of the best — as well as easy two-hour strolls to lookouts and along the beach to historic ruins that start not far from Kingfisher Bay Resort. Or join one of the resort's guided bush tucker or local history walks with one of the resort rangers.

You'll also see plenty of wildlife. The island is famous for its whales — humpbacks stop in Hervey Bay for a rest on their annual migration from Antarctica, taking advantage of the calm waters in the shelter provided by the island. You can get very close to them during winter-time whale-watching tours. There are more than 354 recorded species of birds on the island as well as large populations of wallabies, possums and gliders, and the dingo population is regarded as the most pure strain of dingoes remaining in eastern Australia — you'll often glimpse them on the beach. Head down to the Sunset Bar on the jetty at Kingfisher Bay and you might be lucky enough to see turtles, dugongs or dolphins. Wildlife watching with a glass of bubbles in hand is proof that you don't need to rough it for a close-to-nature experience.

The Great Ocean Road may get all the fame and glory, but as far as coastal drives go, Queensland's Great Beach Drive is also proof that you don't need to get wet to enjoy a beach holiday. And it beats the Bruce Highway any day.

WHERE TO STAY

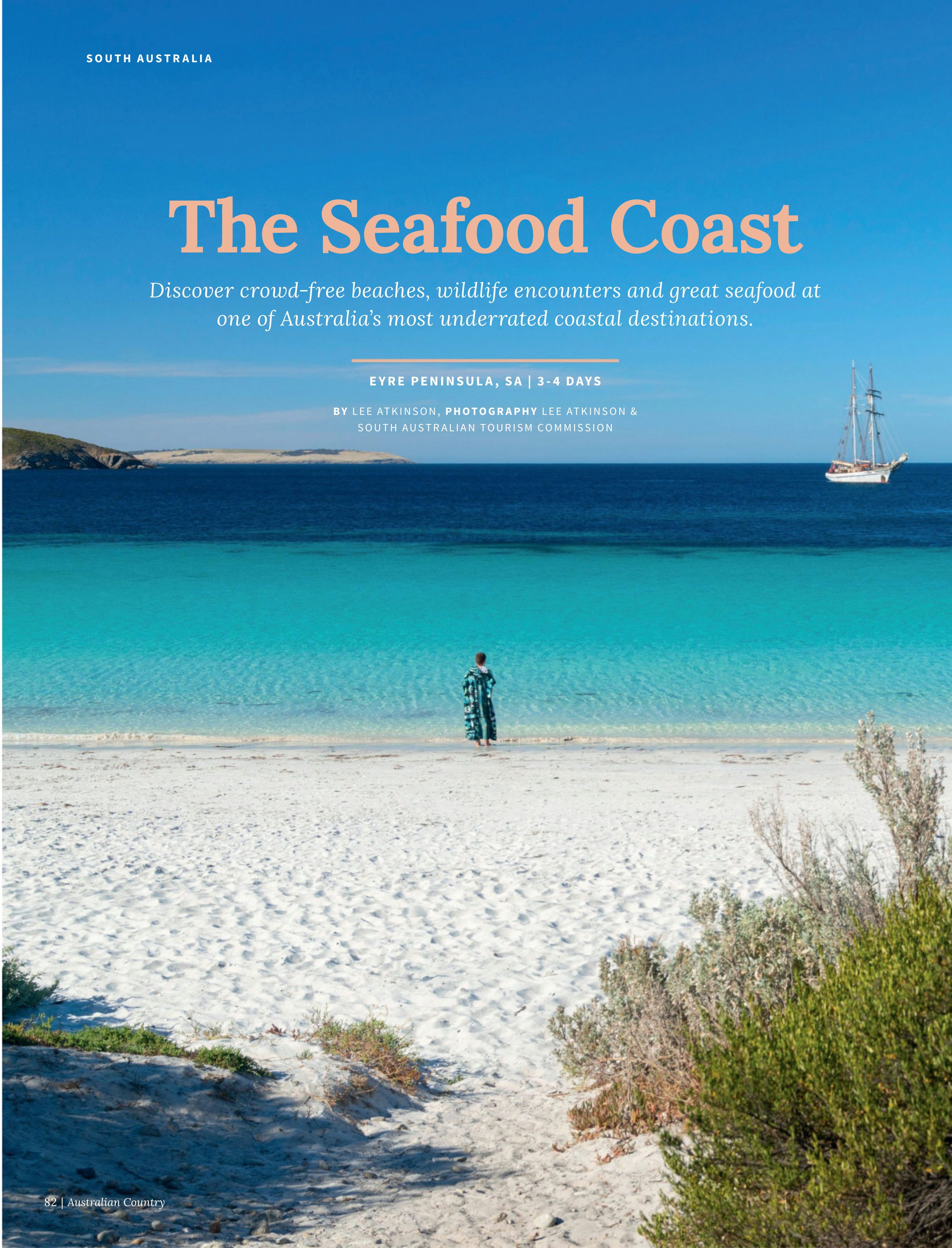
Sofitel Noosa Pacific Resort, Noosa Heads
sofitelnoosapacificresort.com.au
Rainbow Ocean Palms Resort, Rainbow Beach
rainbowoceanpalms.com.au
Kingfisher Bay Resort, K'gari ***kingfisherbay.com***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Sails Restaurant, Noosa Heads ***sailsnoosa.com.au***
Rickys River Bar & Restaurant, Noosa Heads ***rickys.com.au***
Surf Club, Noosa Heads ***noosasurfclub.com.au***
Rainbow Beach Hotel, Rainbow Beach ***rainbowhotel.com.au***
The Sunset Bar, K'gari ***kingfisherbay.com/food-and-wine/sunset-bar***

WHAT TO DO

Koala spotting, Noosa National Park
parks.desi.qld.gov.au/parks/noosa
Hop on, hop off Ferry Cruise, Noosa River ***noosaferry.com***
Learn to Surf, Noosa ***learntosurf.com.au***
Ferries to K'gari, River Heads ***sealink.com.au/kgari-fraser-island***
Whale Watching Cruise, K'gari ***kingfisherbay.com/fraser-island-activities/eco-tours/whale-watching***
Bush Tucker Talk & Taste, K'gari ***www.kingfisherbay.com/food-and-wine/tastes-of-australia***



The Seafood Coast

Discover crowd-free beaches, wildlife encounters and great seafood at one of Australia's most underrated coastal destinations.

EYRE PENINSULA, SA | 3-4 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION

Memory Cove,
Lincoln National Park

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Cape Bauer; Tumby Bay; wheat farm.

The Eyre Peninsula, the triangle of land jutting into the sea between Adelaide and the Great Australian Bight, is the outback gone coastal, where vast, undulating wheat fields tumble into the sea over tall, knife-edged limestone cliffs.

On this beautiful coastal drive you'll find beach after beach visited only by the occasional fisherman, screeching seagulls and very few of the holiday crowds you find along the rest of the Australian coast. Campsites are right on the edge of the beach, and you're often the only ones there.

The distances between towns are not vast, so you could easily drive around the peninsula in three days but take some extra time around Port Lincoln to explore Port Lincoln and Coffin Bay National Parks and allow at least a day each way to get to (and from) Adelaide. To cut a bit of distance you can catch the car ferry from Wallaroo on the Yorke Peninsula to Cowell (Lucky Bay) on the Eyre Peninsula.

Almost all of the coastal towns on the Eyre Peninsula have long wooden jetties, usually lined with hopeful anglers and danglers of hand lines. Originally built to service the grain ships back in the mid-19th century, most of the jetties are very long because many of the towns are on shallow bays. The longest of them all is at Port Germein, at the top of Spencer Gulf. Although it's on the wrong side of the gulf to be part of the Eyre Peninsula, you'll pass by it on your way from Adelaide, and it's the perfect place to stretch your legs. Originally built in 1881, it's a whopping 1680 metres long — so long that from the start you can't see the end. There's a good display of historic equipment at the start of the jetty, and undercover picnic tables.

The Eyre Peninsula officially begins at the shipping and iron ore-mining town of Wyhalla. In recent years, Whyalla has become famous as a place to witness the annual migration of giant cuttlefish, thanks to a ban on commercial fishing that has allowed the once dwindling population of marine molluscs to recover. Now, hundreds of thousands of the chameleonic cephalopods converge at the top of the Spencer Gulf between May and August to breed, and it's one of the only places in the world where you can join diving and snorkeling tours to watch their elaborate underwater mating rituals, which include them changing colours and shape. If you don't fancy getting wet, glass-bottomed boat tours are also available. Ask at the Whyalla visitor centre for details.

Cuttlefish aside, the best bits of the peninsula are to be found farther south along the Lincoln Highway in places like Cowell. The pristine waters of the Eyre Peninsula produce some of the best oysters in the world, and this sleepy town is home to some of the greatest. You can buy them almost anywhere in town — direct from the oyster farmers along Oyster Drive, from the bakery, the cafe, on the jetty or cooked and covered in sauces from one of the hotels. If oysters aren't your favourite food, try the whiting, another Eyre Peninsula specialty.

Continue south to Tumby Bay but take Beach Road rather than the highway out of Cowell and follow the curve of Franklin Harbour through the hamlet of Port Gibbon, past The Knob and other spectacular beaches, on to Arno Bay, Poverty Bay, Redbanks Beach and Port Neill. If you're keen to try

your luck at catching your own seafood feast, the beaches are all good spots to cast a line, or head to the nearest jetty. Most of the time you'll find these wooden piers lined with locals fishing, who'll give you the rundown on what fish are biting where, and often try to give you the fish they caught as well!

The days of the Great Grain Race in the early 20th century, when windjammers jostled for space at the end of the jetties before competing to see who could get their cargo of wheat to England in the fastest time, may be long gone but grain production is still one of the region's main industries — the peninsula yields more than 45 per cent of South Australia's wheat crop, and you'll often see the towering silos on the edge of town long before you get there. Like elsewhere in Australia, many now sport marvelous murals, including the one at Tumby Bay, painted in 2018 by Argentinian street artist Martin Ron, of two young local lads joyfully jumping off the Tumby Bay jetty on a hot day. It's just one of several eye-catching murals you'll find around town.

Tumby Bay's main street follows the curve of the bay and the best food in town (fresh local seafood, of course) is served at the two hotels. Alternatively,

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Silo Art by Martin Ron in Tumby Bay; jetty, Tumby Bay; fresh seafood; shark-cage diving with Calypso Star Charters.

buy some wine and takeaway from one of the seafood shops in town and dine out at one of the picnic tables along the shoreline.

Take a quick detour inland on the Bratten Way to the Smithy Museum in Koppio. It focuses on farming prior to the late 1940s, and the complex includes a pine-log, thatched-roof shepherd's hut, a schoolhouse, a blacksmith's shop, lots of old rural machinery and tractors, and a female pioneers' room. It's worth visiting just for the Bob Dobbins barbed wire collection.

Tumby Bay to Port Lincoln on the tip of the peninsula is an easy half-hour drive.

Just before you get to Port Lincoln, drop into Boston Bay Wines for a wine-tasting and one of the best cellar-door views in the country.

Port Lincoln is home to the largest commercial fishing fleet in the Southern Hemisphere and is famous for its tuna. The annual Tunarama Festival is held on the Australia Day long weekend at the end of January. The headline event is the World Championship Tuna Toss, when crowds gather to see who can throw a 10kg tuna the farthest (the world record is more than 37m). Ask at the Visitor Information Centre for details of fishing charters and behind-the-scenes tours of fish processing plants and aquaculture cruises.

Port Lincoln is also the place to come face to face with a great white shark on a cage dive. You don't have to be a certified diver to do it — but you may have to be certifiably crazy. There are several companies that offer shark-cage dive tours. A less scary alternative — if you can forget for a moment that these waters are home to great white sharks — is swimming with sea lions. Known as the puppy dogs of the sea, they are insatiably curious, love to play and will often mimic your actions, circling when you do and diving and surfacing with you; often the same companies that run the shark dives also run half-day swimming with sea lion tours.

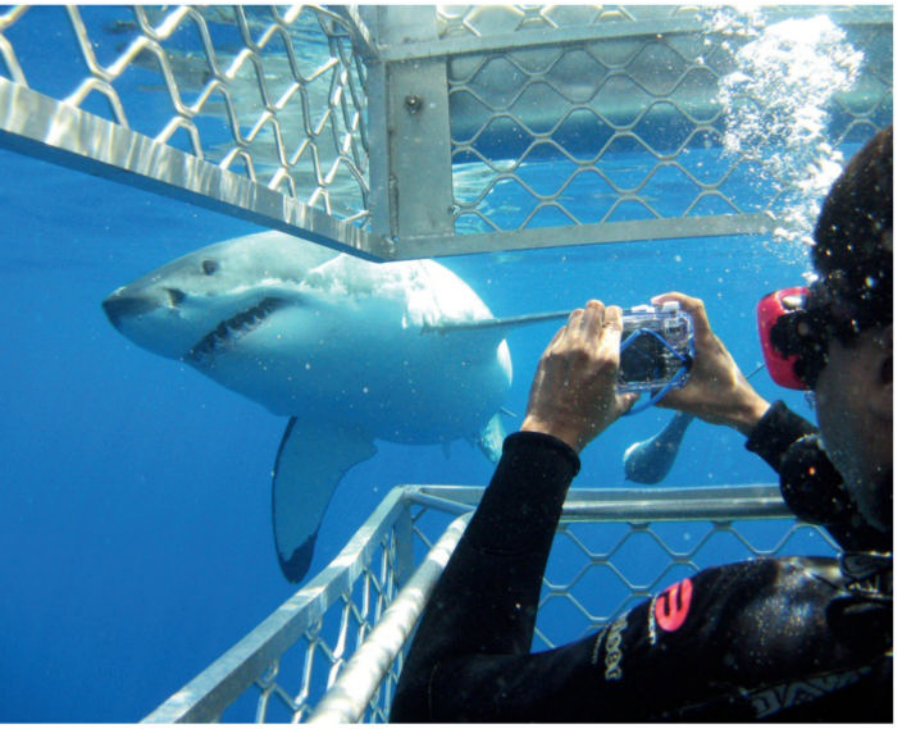
But it's not just the fish that are fast and furious in Port Lincoln. Makybe Diva, the first horse to win the Melbourne Cup three times in a row (2003, 2004 and 2005) is owned by South Australian tuna fisherman Tony Santic, who named her after the first two letters in five of his employees' names (Maureen, Kylie, Belinda, Diana and Vanessa). There is a life-size bronze sculpture of the great racehorse on the Port Lincoln waterfront.

Port Lincoln is the largest town on the peninsula and has plenty of cafes, galleries and shops. Port Lincoln's Fresh Fish Place is your one-stop shop when it comes to the best of the peninsula's local seafood. Housed at the front of a fish processing factory in the industrial part of town, the retail section specialises in locally caught fish, scallops, oysters, abalone, prawns, crab and crayfish. They also have a range of seafood that is pickled and smoked in house and a licensed café, or you can get some cooked fish and chips to take away. Behind-the-scenes factory tours and seafood cooking classes are also available.

However the best part of this bit of the world is the scenery, and the nearby Lincoln National Park is a must. There are a number of scenic drives that are fine for 2WDs, as well as a challenging 4WD-only one to the rugged southern section of the park. This traverses largely along the cliff edges to the Sleaford sand dunes, an endless expanse of towering white sand dunes bordering beaches pounded by enormous waves. The more sheltered, northern section of the park (2WD accessible) has a string of pretty bays and calm beaches, most with camping areas and picnic sites. Pick of the crop is Memory Cove, but you will need to get a gate key from the visitor centre in Port Lincoln before you go and a 4WD is recommended.

Another great day trip from Port Lincoln is The Whalers Way, a 14km cliff-edged drive through private property south of Port Lincoln.

PO4 11156
MELANIE
INTREPID
LUNAR SEA



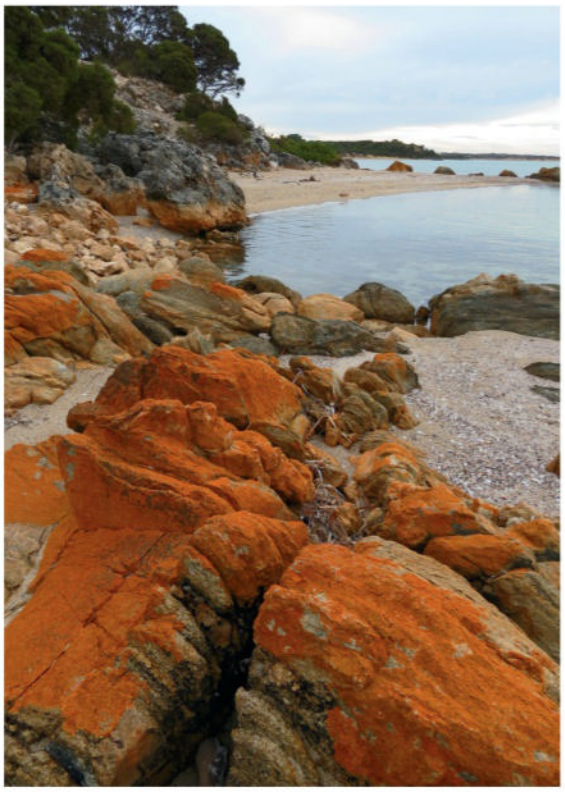
It is worth the $30 it costs to get a key from the visitor centre in Port Lincoln. It's sublimely scenic, tracing the coastline the entire way, with several good picnic spots. You can camp behind the dunes at Redbanks Beach near the end of the drive, a magic spot that never gets crowded out, with sensational views (but no facilities) and a ladder to climb down to the rockpools on the beach. Get a camping permit when you pick up the key.

From Port Lincoln, head north along the western edge of the peninsula in the direction of Streaky Bay to visit Coffin Bay.

Coffin Bay National Park is about 40km from Port Lincoln and is great for 4WDs. You can drive the length of the peninsula to Point Sir Isaac, but be warned, the sand can trap even the most experienced off-roader. Lower your tyre pressure and carry a compressor to reinflate them — you will need to do this several times during the trip. It's only 55km from the ranger station, but it will take around three hours each way. Much of the road is actually on the beach, so you need to check the tide chart before you set off. There are good camping spots along the way at Black Springs and Point Sir Isaac — both sites are practically on the beach and the fishing is good. If you're in a conventional car there are also plenty of great beaches and lookouts you can visit — and a campground at Yangie Bay — although you will not be able to get deep inside the park.

If you're an oyster lover you'll be familiar with Coffin Bay oysters, arguably some of the world's best. In the township of Coffin Bay, ask one of the locals for directions to where you can buy some freshly shucked oysters (lots of local oyster growers sell them from backyard sheds for just a few dollars) and find a shady spot on the Oyster Walk that skirts the edge of the bay for a five-star lunch.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Black Springs, Coffin Bay National Park; Sensation Beach; Fishermans Point; Lincoln National Park.



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Venus Bay; Great White replica in Streaky Bay; swimming with sea lions in Baird Bay; The Fresh Fish Place in Port Lincoln; oyster farm tours.

Farther north, Elliston is home to a very scenic cliff-top drive, with cliffs as sensational as those you'll see on the Great Australian Bight — and some quirky sculptures. A highlight of the next section is Talia Caves, which were hollowed out of the granite and limestone cliffs by the sea. There are steps down to a large cavern in the cliff base and a ladder to the The Tub, a large, craterlike hole around 30m deep and 50m wide.

All along this section of the coast you'll see turnoffs to small coastal communities and deserted beaches, and if you are not in a rush (and it would be a shame to rush this trip) it's fun to explore them. One not to miss is Venus Bay, where the general store (there's only the one) sells quite possibly the world's best fish and chips — locally caught King George Whiting, perfectly battered and super fresh. That said, the seafood — from oysters and prawns to abalone and fish — everywhere on the Eyre Peninsula is superb: don't go home without eating as much as you can. The jetty in Venus Bay is a good place to catch squid and whiting, and the South Head walking trail is a great spot to see dolphins, sea lions and in winter, migrating Southern right whales. It's also the perfect place to watch the sun go down.

Follow the signs to Baird Bay and the Point Labatt Australian sea lion colony, the only permanent breeding colony on mainland Australia — all other colonies occur on offshore islands. There is a viewing platform on the cliff top where you can watch mothers teaching their pups to swim (you'll need binoculars if you want a really good view), or you can get really up close and personal on a swimming with sea lions and dolphin tour in Baird Bay.

Back on the highway, a local landmark, Murphy's Haystacks, is not far from the turn-off to Baird Bay. The 'haystacks' are actually a hilltop outcrop of large granite boulders, with walkways between them. Local legend has it that a traveller mistook the rocks — which were on a farm owned by a Murphy — for hay, and the name stuck. It's a nice spot for a picnic.

In Streaky Bay, pop into the Shell Roadhouse to take a look at the replica of the biggest white pointer shark ever caught by rod and reel — a very scary 5m long and weighing in at a whopping 1520kg. It was caught in the waters off Streaky Bay in 1990 and is enough to put you off swimming in the Southern Ocean for life.

From Streaky Bay, continue north to Ceduna via Smoky Bay. Like just about everywhere else on the peninsula, both towns produce fabulous oysters. If you're not sick of them yet, make a beeline to the Ceduna Oyster Barn, opposite the servo on the Eyre Highway on the northern edge of town where the road trains fill up before (and after) they hit the Nullarbor. At first glance it's not the most glamorous of spots for an alfresco lunch — a non-descript steel shed — but order a dozen freshly shucked oysters, some sushi or fish and chips, grab a piccolo of wine or a can of cold beer and head up onto the rooftop or the back verandah. They also serve curry and dumplings for those that don't like shellfish. Flash it's not, but who cares when you're dining out on some of the Eyre Peninsula's finest? And it's cheap as chips. Get an extra dozen to take away.

From here you can either head west across the Nullarbor or back east to Adelaide on Highway 1. But be warned: with scenery and seafood this good, the Eyre Peninsula can be a very hard place to leave.

WHERE TO STAY

Tumby Bay Hotel, Tumby Bay, ***tumbybaypub.com***
Tanonga Luxury Eco-Lodges, Charlton Gully ***tanonga.com.au***
Port Lincoln Hotel, Port Lincoln ***portlincolnhotel.com.au***
Point Lowly Lighthouse Cottages, Lincoln National Park ***kataandbelle.com.au/point-lowly-cottages***
Baird Bay Apartments, Baird Bay ***bairdbay.com/seaside-villas***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Boston Bay Wines, Port Lincoln ***bostonbaywines.com.au***
The Fresh Fish Place, Port Lincoln ***freshfishplace.com.au***
1802 Oyster Bar, Coffin Bay ***1802oysterbar.com.au***
Streaky Bay Community Hotel, Steaky Bay ***streakybayhotel.com.au***
Ceduna Oyster Barn, Ceduna ***facebook.com/cedunaoyster***

WHAT TO DO

Spencer Gulf Ferries, Wallaroo ***spencergulfsearoad.com***
Smithy Museum, Koppio ***nationaltrust.org.au/places/koppio-smithy-museum***
Shark-cage dive tours, Port Lincoln ***sharkcagediving.com.au***
Swim with sea lions, Ocean Eco Tours, Baird Bay ***bairdbay.com***
Oyster farm tours, Coffin Bay ***experiencecoffinbay.com.au***

The Murray Mouth,
near Goolwa

The Limestone Coast

Put the fun back into the Melbourne to Adelaide commute and follow the coast rather than the highway from the Victorian border to the Murray Mouth.

SOUTH-EASTERN SA | 2-3 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & SOUTH AUSTRALIAN TOURISM COMMISSION

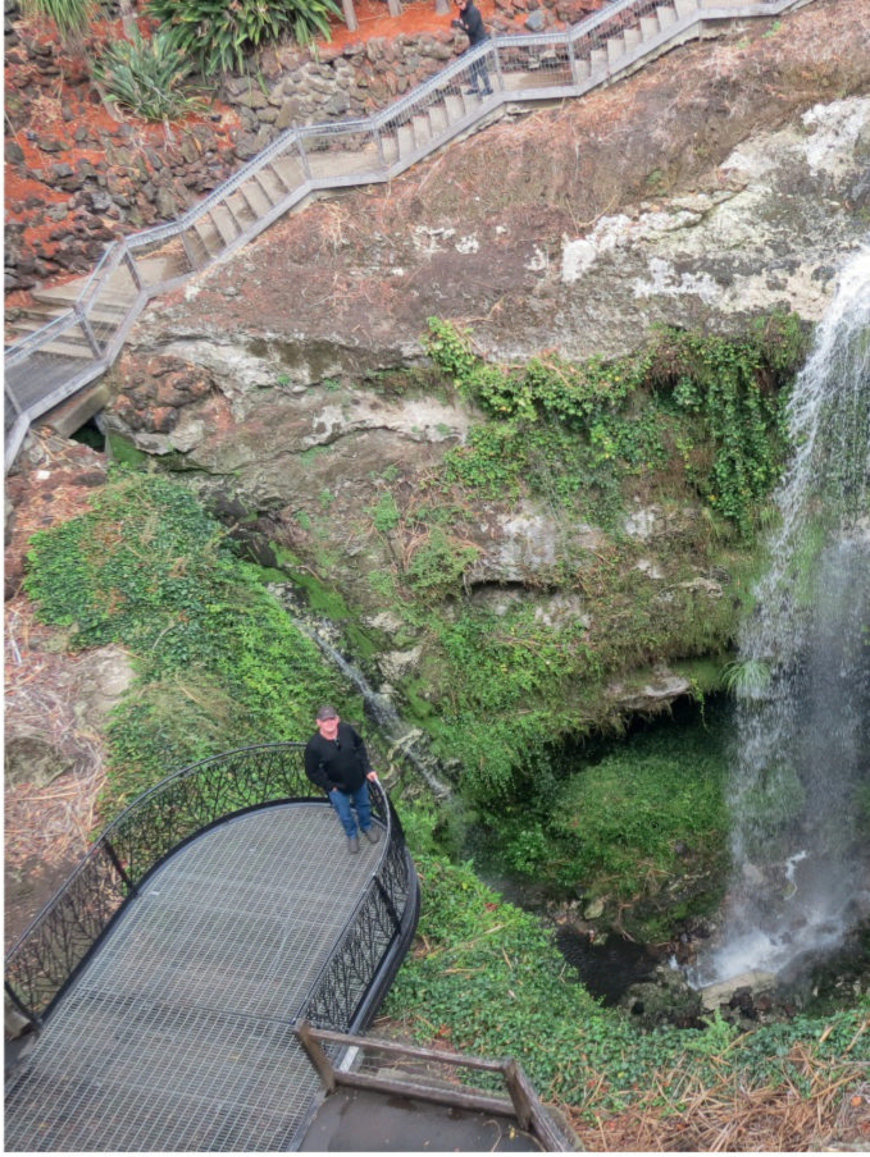
THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from right) Mount Gambier attractions include the Cave Garden; Riddoch Art Gallery; Blue Lake and the sunken gardens inside Umpherston Sinkhole.

The rugged eastern coastline of South Australia, known as the Limestone Coast, is a place of mysteries and wonder, with some of Australia's youngest volcanoes, magical sinkhole gardens, fossil-filled caves and mystifying lakes that change colour virtually overnight. It's also home to Australia's first saint, the country's most celebrated red wine and the world's largest lobster. With a roll call of road-tripping delights like that, how can you resist?

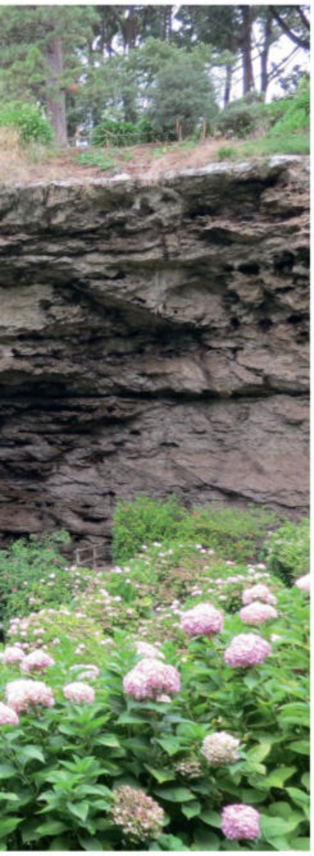
Located just west of the Victoria-South Australia border, Mount Gambier is roughly halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide. South Australia's second largest city is also home to dormant volcanic cones and lots of crater lakes, caves and sinkholes, but is best known for its Blue Lake, a 75 metre-deep lake inside an extinct volcanic crater on the edge of town. Actually there are three lakes here, but only one changes colour each year: in winter, the lake is a steely grey, but over the course of a few days in November the water changes to a brilliant cyan blue and stays that way until March. Although there are lots of theories, no one is really quite sure why this happens. You can drive (or walk) around the rim of the volcano, and there are several lookouts that enable you to peer down into it. You can also take a glass-panelled lift down into the crater for a close-up view during a 45-minute Aquifer Tour.

The ground beneath Mount Gambier's streets is a labyrinth of limestone caves. The most accessible is the Engelbrecht Cave, which extends under seven city streets. Once used as a dump by one of the city's whisky distilleries, it's now open for tours. Other must-see spots around town include the two sunken sinkhole gardens. The Cave Garden — a State Heritage Area — is in the middle of town and has a free 15-minute sound-and-light show every night at around 8pm. Umpherston Sinkhole, approximately 2km from the town centre (on Jubilee Hwy East), is also worth visiting at night, when possums descend in large numbers to feed — BYO torch. Both are open 24 hours and are free to enter.

If you're a red wine lover, take a short detour to Penola in the heart of the Coonawarra. Known as Australia's answer to Bordeaux, the Coonawarra is celebrated for its red wines, particularly cabernet sauvignon, thanks to a legendary 12km-long, 2km-wide cigar-shaped strip of rich terra-rossa soil. According to the experts this soil, which sits atop a white limestone base that was once the ocean floor, is one of the most productive *terroirs* outside Europe.



ART GALLERY



Millicent

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) Seaview Trail views in Canunda National Park; Penola.

More than 20 Coonawarra wineries offer cellar-door sales and most are open seven days a week.

The commercial hub of the Coonawarra is the tiny township of Penola, which is full of antique stores, galleries and boutiques. Petticoat Lane, the oldest residential part of Penola, still has red gum kerbing and is lined with original timber-and-stone cottages. The township's most famous past resident, though, is undoubtedly Mary MacKillop, Australia's first saint. Together with Father Julian Tenison-Woods, Mary MacKillop founded the religious order of the Sisters of St Joseph in Penola in 1866. You can learn all about Mary MacKillop's life and times and her many good works in the Mary MacKillop Penola Centre, which is full of historic displays as well as a Mary MacKillop shrine, an old schoolhouse and a gift shop packed full of every type of Mary MacKillop memento you can imagine.

Another great little side trip, especially if you are interested in fossils or have youngsters with a fascination for dinosaurs and big critters — and what kid doesn't love learning about zygomaturus, marsupial lions and giant kangaroos? — Naracoorte Caves, South Australia's only World Heritage Site, is worth the hour or so drive from Mount Gambier. The caves have acted as pitfall traps, collecting animals unlucky enough to fall through the holes in the ground for more than 800,000 years and consequently preserving the bones of a range of prehistoric megafauna. There are 28 known caves in the park, and four are open for tours, including adventure caving and behind-the-scenes tours of working fossil digs and the fossil lab, as well as the above ground Wonambi Fossil Centre.

From Mount Gambier, head toward the coast via Millicent. Keep an eye out on the way for the prowling tiger on the roof of the Tantanoola Tiger Hotel. In the 1880s, after the discovery of a number of mauled sheep, locals became convinced that a Bengal tiger had escaped from a travelling circus. In 1895, several hundred sheep and a lot of hysteria later, a beast was shot by bushman Tom Donovan. It turned out, though, that it was not a tiger but an Assyrian wolf, thought to have stowed away on a boat that was shipwrecked off the coast — and that the real culprit responsible for most of the missing sheep was a local thief called Charlie Edmondson. The wolf-tiger was stuffed and is still on display inside the hotel.

There's no shortage of fantastic seaside walking trails on the Limestone Coast to stretch your legs but one not to miss is the Seaview Trail in Canunda National Park between Southend and Beachport. It starts near the car park at Cape Buffon near Southend and takes around three hours return. It's clifftop almost the entire way, and the name just about sums it up — it's one jaw-dropping sea view after another.

Beachport has one of the longest jetties in South Australia and some great fresh lobster shops. The Bowman Scenic Drive is a short but stunning coastal road that sweeps around the beaches and dunes south of the town centre, taking in several lookouts along the way. It skirts the edge of the Pool of Siloam, a salt lake seven times saltier than the sea which is reputed to cure all matter of aches and pains, particularly those of an arthritic or rheumatic kind. The high salt content makes the water very buoyant, and on a hot day it's a wonderful place for a soak and a float.

Home to around 1200 or so people, Robe is today a pretty sleepy sort of place but in the 1850s it was South Australia's second busiest international port. There are more than 80 historic buildings and sites around town; you can pick up a heritage walking trail map at the visitor centre near the beach. Robe's popularity in the mid-19th century was partly the result of a £10 landing tax imposed on all gold seekers arriving in Victoria during the gold rush. For many, particularly the Chinese gold-seekers, that was more than the cost of their voyage to Australia, so they chose to arrive in Robe instead and head overland to the diggings on foot. There's a monument to the

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) Bowman Scenic Drive; Beachport and its iconic jetty; Larry the Lobster, Kingston SE.

16,000 Chinese who walked the 200 miles (320km) to Ballarat and Bendigo near the Customs House.

The Limestone Coast is also famous for its southern rock lobster, and the Big Lobster, a 17 metre-high spiny red crustacean known to the locals simply as Larry, is just half an hour up the road at Kingston SE. Legend has it that the original lobster was only meant to be 17 feet tall, but the builder misread the plans and used metres instead. There are plenty of places you can buy real lobster, as well as fish and chips, in town. The lobster season is from October through to May. Even if you're not keen on eating seafood it's an irresistible spot to stop for a selfie standing between Larry's claws.

The next 150km or so of this road trip skirts the edge of the Coorong, a long lagoon and windswept beach known as Kurangk ('long narrow neck') by the Ngarrindjeri people. Today much of it is protected by Coorong National Park and the wealth of archaeological sites — shell middens and evidence of campsites used over thousands of years — testify to the cultural significance of the coastal wetlands to the traditional owners. The waterways attract an enormous variety of birds, and the area was made famous by the 1976 movie

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Goolwa; Birks Harbour; Little Blue Lake; Lacepede Seafood; Cave Gardens, Mount Gambier; fresh lobster.

made from Colin Thiele's children's novel, *Storm Boy*, about a young boy who befriends a pelican called Mr Percival — one of the largest breeding colonies of the Australian pelican is at Jack Point. It's also a good spot for kayaking, boating and fishing, and the *Spirit of the Coorong* has a range of full- and half-day sightseeing and adventure tours.

If you have a 4WD you can motor along the narrow ribbon of sand called the Younghusband Peninsula for 150km, from the Granites near Kingston SE to the mouth of the Murray River. Separated from the mainland by a chain of saltwater lagoons, the peninsula has huge flocks of waterbirds, gorgeous beaches and tall dunes, but you need to be wary of wind and tide conditions and the route should not be attempted in winter.

At Meningie, the road turns inland, along the shores of Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina — the original name of Queen Victoria before she took the throne — where the Murray River spreads out to become the largest freshwater lake in South Australia, wide and shallow and ringed with reeds and bursting with birdlife. From here, the Murray finally creeps towards the ocean, tracing one last great bend at Goolwa before seeping into the sea at the Murray Mouth on Hindmarsh Island. To get there you'll need to take the free car ferries across the Murray River at Narrung (birthplace of David Unaipon, the Ngarrindjeri man featured on the Australian $50 note, with the Raukkan church in the background) and Wellington, and follow the road around the edge of the lake to Goolwa.

Oozing history at almost every turn, Goolwa was once a thriving river port where paddle steamers unloaded their cargo on to the country's first railway, which ferried the goods to the seaports of Port Elliot and Victor Harbor. Now known as the SteamRanger Cockle Train, it's been a popular tourist route since 1887, earning its rather quaint name from the large cockles found on the sandy surf beaches of Goolwa. Take a walk along the river's edge, past historic boatsheds and slipways, where paddle steamers once docked, or head out the boardwalk over the sand dunes for coastal views. The town is full of beautiful sandstone buildings, many of them now home to art galleries and restaurants.

To get to the river mouth, cross the bridge to Hindmarsh Island where you'll find a lookout platform and you can usually walk along the beach unless the area has been recently dredged, which occasionally happens during times of low water flows to prevent its closure. It might be Australia's mightiest river, flowing more than 2500km from the mountains to the sea, but its end point is not as dramatic as you might expect.

From Goolwa, it's around a 75-minute drive north to Adelaide, unless you get waylaid at one of the wineries or galleries along the way. The coast route might take a little longer that the inland A8, but it's a lot more fun.

LOBSTERS
FRESH FISH

WHERE TO STAY

Mount Gambier Gaol, Mount Gambier ***theoldmountgambiergaol.com.au***
MUSt@Coonawarra, Penola ***mustatcoonawarra.com.au***
Robe House, Robe ***robehouse.com.au***
The Boathouse, Goolwa ***birksharbour.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

The Barn Steakhouse, Mount Gambier ***barn.com.au***
Pipers of Penola, Penola ***pipersofpenola.com.au***
Upstairs at Hollicks, Coonawarra ***hollick.com***
Caledonian Inn, Robe ***caledonianinnrobe.com.au***
Lacepede Seafood, Kingston SE ***facebook.com/lacepedeseafood/***
Fleurieu Distillery and Steam Exchange Brewery, Goolwa ***fleurieudistillery.com.au***
Bombora on the river, Goolwa ***bomboragoolwa.com***

WHAT TO DO

Aquifer Tour, Mount Gambier ***aquifertours.com***
Engelbrecht Cave and the Cave Garden, Mount Gambier ***discovermountgambier.com.au***
Mary MacKillop Penola Centre, Penola, ***mackilloppenola.org.au***
Naracoorte Caves, 10km south of Naracoorte ***aracoortecaves.sa.gov.au***
Spirit of the Coorong tours and cruises, Goolwa ***spiritofthecoorong.com.au***
The Cockle Train, Goolwa ***steamrangerheritagerailway.org***

Trousers Point Beach

Flinders Island

The perfect beach holiday road trip might just be a little farther south than you think

EASTERN BASS STRAIT, TAS | 3-4 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM TASMANIA

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Whitemark Beach and township; Swimming at Trousers Point Beach; Fotheringate Bay.

Forget about battling it out for towel space on the crowded beaches of Bondi, Byron and beyond. You're pretty much guaranteed to find a deserted beach on Flinders Island, even in the middle of the summer. After all, the locals have a golden rule when it comes to sharing their sandy shores: "if you find a beach with someone on it, find another one."

Flinders Island, in the middle of Bass Strait off Tasmania's north-east coast, is home to some of the most beautiful fine white sand beaches in the country. The largest of the Furneaux Group — 52 islands that once formed a land bridge between Tasmania and mainland Australia — it's part of the same dramatic rocky mountain range that forms Wilsons Promontory in Victoria and the Hazard mountains of the Freycinet Peninsula on Tassie's east coast. It's about as far away from your typical island paradise as you can possibly get, but if you want to play castaways there's no better place.

Despite its location straddling the 40th parallel in the middle of one of the most storm-wracked stretches of water, Flinders Island is a surprisingly balmy place, even if it does get a little windy on occasion. As the locals like to boast, it's much warmer than Melbourne in the winter. But don't expect tropical; summer temperatures peak in the low 20s and be prepared for showers at any time of the year.

At roughly 80km long, it doesn't take long to drive the length of the island, but it will take much longer than you expect as you won't be able to resist the urge to get out of the car to check out one beautiful beach after another. Aim to spend three or four days, or even a week.

There's really only one major road on the island — the B85 — and it runs tip to toe on the eastern side. Whitemark, the island's main (only, really) town is roughly in the middle, so we've split this road trip up into two sections: one in the north, the other in the south. Whitemark is also where the airport and car rental pick up is — apart from a weekly freight service from Bridport in northern Tasmania there are no ferries from either the mainland or Tassie, so most travellers get to Flinders Island by air, from Launceston, Hobart or Essendon near Melbourne. Car and campervan hire is available, but you'll need to arrange this before you arrive as cars are limited.

But once you're there time moves slowly on Flinders, and it doesn't seem to take very long at all before you've slowed down to match the pace of the locals, who always wave as you drive past and usually stop for a chat when you're picking up supplies in the town's commercial

'capital', Whitemark (imagine a pub, supermarket, newsagent, cafe and bakery, and you've pictured the whole town). By your third morning you'll probably find yourself on a first-name basis with most folk you pass, so be prepared that a quick outing to get a morning coffee may well turn into a 45-minute walk as people stop to ask you how you've been getting on and what you've been doing during your stay — it's that kind of place.

The island's most famous beach, Trousers Point, is close to the southern end of the island, via Lady Barron Rd (B85) and Trousers Point Rd.

There's a bit of a mystery as to how this dazzling beach got its name: legend has that a shipless Richard Burgess washed up here without his pants in the 1870s; another tale credits the name to the discovery on the beach of a box of trousers from a different shipwreck in 1875. Either way, with its curve of white sand lapped by the palest of turquoise water bookended by the ubiquitous orange-lichen covered boulders that seem an essential ingredient of every beach on the island, it's one of the most photographed spots on Flinders. It's also home to one of the best walks on the island, a one-hour loop along the rocky coastline to Fotheringate Beach and back. Or if you're feeling really energetic climb to the summit of the Strzelecki Peaks. The 3km walk to the summit is not an easy one, (it takes about four to five hours return) but if you make it to the top without the weather closing in the 360-degree views of the island and surrounding waters are spectacular.

Backtrack up to the B85 and head to the port of Lady Barron. Call in on the way to Unavale Vineyard, a lovely little boutique winery hidden away in the bush that produces some great-tasting hand-crafted organic wine. They also welcome visitors helping out with various vineyard activities, so check out their website to see what's happening during your visit if you would like to get involved.

There's no town centre to speak of in Lady Barron, even though there are just as many people living here as in Whitemark. It's also the island's main port. The Furneaux Tavern offers good food with knockout views over Franklin Sound, often has spontaneous live music when the locals get together for a play-along and to sing some songs. If you're keen to catch a fish, this is the place to ask the locals what's biting where: good catches include snapper, salmon, flathead and kingfish. Nearby Yellow Beach is great for a walk and barbecue, especially if you've managed to catch your own dinner (or bought some crayfish from a local).

The nearby islands, including Cape Barren Island, are home to millions of short-tailed shearwaters (muttonbirds) and during the summer months — November to May — you can join a sunset cruise from the Lady Barron jetty to see the spectacle of the birds returning to the rookery to feed their chicks.

Flinders is home to more than 200 species of birds, including the giant wandering albatross and huge pacific gulls, eagles and endangered forty-spotted pardalote, as well as Cape Barren Geese; the Adelaide Bay bird hide on the coast road is a good place to watch them.

The beaches of the north are just as spectacular as those in the south, and just as deserted. Around a 10-minute drive north of Whitemark towards Emita you'll find Sawyers Beach, a near perfect combination of white sand, gin-clear water, with three shady picnic areas and lots of boulders to clamber over and snorkel around, and good paddling for little kids in the many sheltered sections near the northern end.

In 1834, 135 Palawa people from across mainland Tasmania and the Furneaux Islands were forcibly moved onto Flinders Island to be 'civilised and christianised' at a place called Wybalenna. Almost all died in a matter of years as a result of European causes. All that is left of the ill-fated settlement that lasted less than 15 years is the chapel and a

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Hiking on Flinders Island; Kelp gull; Yellow Beach near Lady Barron; Mt Strzelecki.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Sawyers Beach; Killiekrankie Bay; crayfish; Port Davies.

few European graves; Palawa people were buried in unmarked graves. In 1995 the land was returned to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Community, and it's now a protected historic monument and sacred burial site. A visit to the chapel is a brutal reminder of a very dark time in Australia's history.

You can find out a bit more about the tragic events that happened at Wybalenna and during the Black Wars back up the road a little at the Furneaux Museum. You can easily spend an hour or two wandering around the exhibits. The collection of exquisite Palawa shell necklaces, many donated by the owner of Bowman's General Store in Whitemark, where they had been traded for supplies over the years, is outstanding. Other artefacts include the anchor of the *Sydney Cove*, wrecked on Preservation Island in 1797 more than 12 months before the Bass Strait was even discovered by Europeans. The story of the epic journey of some of the survivors by sea and land back to Sydney to mount a rescue mission rescue is fascinating, as is the subsequent settlement of the islands by sealers. Other exhibitions focus on mutton-birding, an important traditional industry in the islands that is still carried out today, local history preserved in hundreds of photo albums and extensive displays of natural history specimens. Opening hours vary, so check before travelling.

Just a few kilometres past Wybalenna at Port Davies is another good spot to watch thousands of muttonbirds return to their burrows, at the Settlement Point View Platform. Breeding season starts in September, but the best time to see them is at dusk between November and April; if you're here in late January you may see chicks as well. There's also a good 90-minute return coastal walk from Allports Beach to Castle Rock, featuring a very photogenic and very big boulder on Marshall Bay.

Between Marshall Bay near Emita and Palana in the north there are several roads that spear off to the coast to fabulous beaches. If you only stop at one make it the crescent of white sand lapped by sapphire water at Killiecrankie, 25km north of Emita. In summer you'll often see cray boats tethered to the rocks and wooden holding pens bobbing in the water, full of crayfish, but it's not the scenery or seafood that's the attraction. If you are lucky enough to spy a local here, ask them to point you in the direction of Diamond Creek (about 2km along the beach), where you can (hopefully) pick up one of the locally famous Killiecrankie diamonds. You'll need a shovel and sieve, which you can hire from Killiecrankie Enterprises in Whitemark. They are actually topaz — the ones found on the island are usually clear, ice blue or pink gold — but they look so much like diamonds you'd have to be an expert to tell the difference and the shops (both of them) in Whitemark sell these beautiful stones. If you don't find a gem, you may be lucky enough to find a paper nautilus shell. According to local legend, these paper-thin shells made by an argonaut — a type of octopus — wash up on the western beaches of the island in largish numbers

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Paper nautilus shell; North East River.

every seven years, but as with all rare finds, you have to be in the right place at the right time.

On the way to Palana, take the turn-off to West End Road and wind your way up to the top of Mount Tanner for a fantastic view of both Killiecrankie Bay and nearby Royden Island.

At the top of the island, Palana looks big on the map but is little more than a clutch of beach houses overlooking a spectacular stretch of sand, perfect for long solitary strolls. It was originally set up as a radar station in WWII, and some of the old shacks are still there. From here, follow the road to North East River on the northern most tip of the island for fabulous views across to the offshore islands known as The Sisters. Spend some time exploring the tidal estuaries, rock pools, granite bluffs and lichen-covered rocks. Wild and windswept and pounded by surf, it's highly unlikely you'll see anyone else, let alone another set of footprints on this beach.

The beaches really are beautiful on Flinders Island. With its spine of steep granite mountains and necklace of more than 100 white sandy coves for less than 1000 people, finding an empty one is much easier than you might think.

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Strzelecki Peaks, Strzelecki National Park; Furneaux Distillery; Furneaux Tavern; Unavale Vineyard; Strzelecki National Park.

WHERE TO STAY

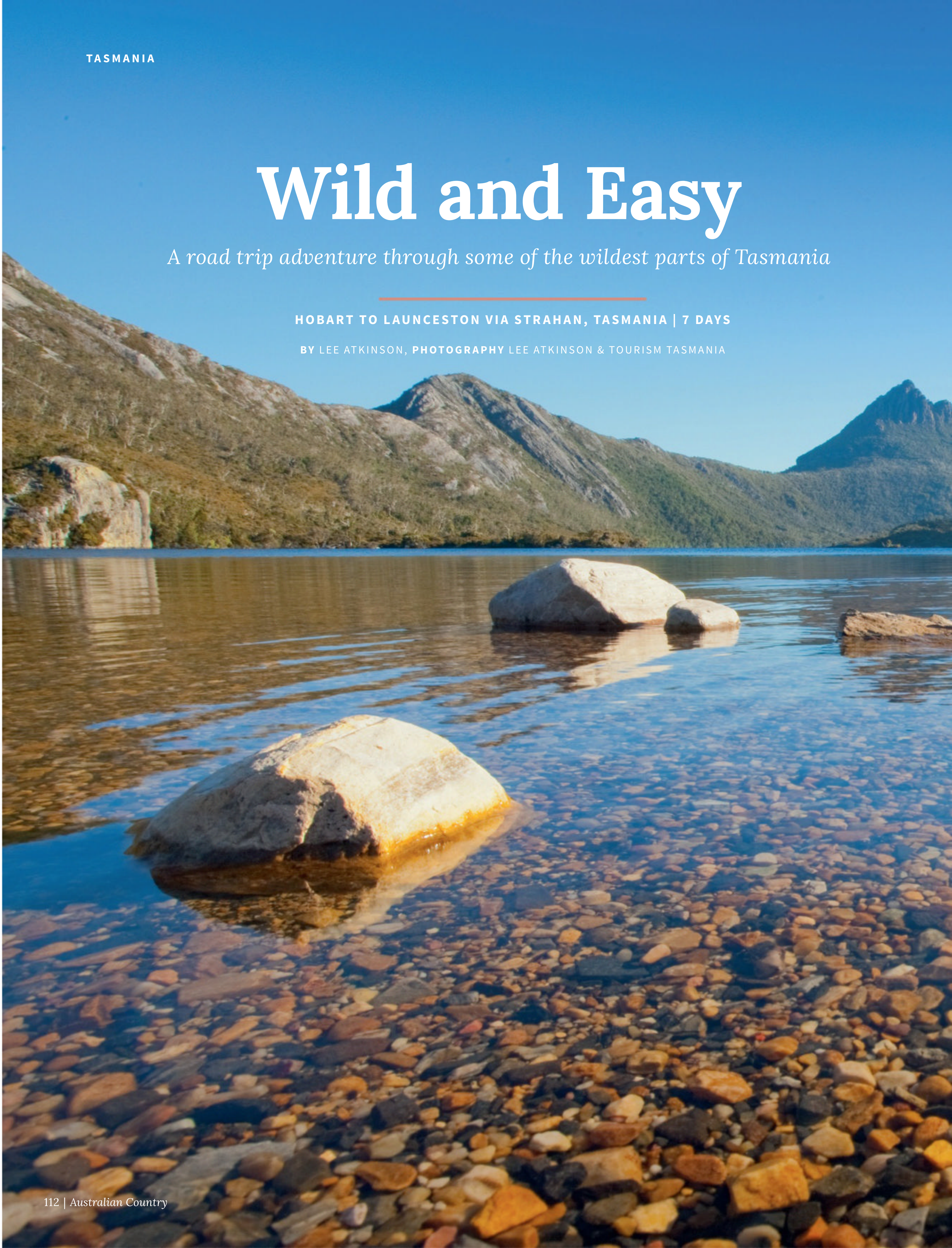
Island Quarters, Whitemark ***islandquarters.com.au***
Palana Beach House, Palana Beach ***flindersislandbeach.com***
Furneaux Tavern, Lady Barron, ***furneauxtavern.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Interstate Hotel, Whitemark ***interstatehotel.com.au***
Flinders Wharf, Whitemark ***onislandtime.com.au/thelarder***
Furneaux Tavern, Lady Barron, ***furneauxtavern.com.au***
Furneaux Distillery, Whitemark ***furneauxdistillery.com.au***
Unavale Vineyard, near Lady Barron ***unavale.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Furneaux Museum, Emita ***furneauxmuseum.org.au***
Bowman's History Room, Whitemark ***visitflindersisland.com.au/explore/culture-heritage***
Flinders Island Car Hire, Whitemark ***flindersislandcp.com.au***
Flinders Island Car Rentals, Whitemark ***ficr.com.au***
Strzelecki National Park ***parks.tas.gov.au/explore-our-parks/strzelecki-national-park***
Tours and Sunset Cruises, Lady Barron ***flindersislandtravel.com.au***



Wild and Easy

A road trip adventure through some of the wildest parts of Tasmania

HOBART TO LAUNCESTON VIA STRAHAN, TASMANIA | 7 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM TASMANIA

Dove Lake and
Cradle Mountain

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Mount Field National Park; Cradle Mountain and Dove Lake; Lake St Clair; The Wall in the Wilderness; wombat.

Tasmania's rugged highlands and west coast is one of the world's wildest places, a sparsely inhabited region with craggy mountain ranges, 2000-year-old trees, wild rivers and great swathes of World Heritage-listed wilderness.

Most adventure holidays in Tasmania typically involve mud-encrusted gaiters, heavy backpacks and extreme exertions. The hardcore trekkers out there will tell you that you need a heap of planning and an even bigger mountain of gear. But that's not strictly true. On this week-long road trip across Tasmania from Hobart to Launceston via the west coast, you don't need to spend days slogging through the rainforests, sleeping in tents and eating rehydrated rations out of an aluminium pot to get into the heart of wilderness. You don't even need to get wet feet. It's about as wild as you can get in a car.

Be warned though, there's a lot to see and do on this road trip: it may not look that far on a map, but it will take much more time than you might think. Take it easy and enjoy the journey and allow at least a week, one way, including a day or two in both Strahan and Cradle Mountain. And bring your raincoat because the west coast is notoriously wet, all year.

Begin in Hobart and follow the signs to Launceston before turning off to New Norfolk and Lake St Clair on the Lyell Highway. It's a pretty drive that will take around four hours through the Derwent Valley, past farmlands, hop fields, forests and remnants of rainforest.

Take a short detour into Mount Field National Park. Tasmania's oldest national park and one of its most popular, it has a rich variety of vegetation ranging from tall swamp-gum forests (some of the tallest trees in the world) and immense tree ferns to rainforest, pandani groves, sphagnum bogs and alpine tarns at the top of the mountain. Highlights include beautiful three-tiered Russell Falls, Lake Dobson and lots of wildlife.

Back on the road, make a quick stop at the Wall in the Wilderness in Derwent Bridge just before the turn-off to Lake St Clair. The 100m-long, 3m-high huon pine sculpture depicting the history of Tasmania's central highlands is still a work in progress, but the beautifully carved panels are stunning — and very realistic. It a great chance to see a masterpiece in the making.

Your next stop is Lake St Clair, just up the road. Carved out by glaciers over the last two million years, Lake St Clair is the deepest lake in Australia. Located at the southern end of Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park, it's the terminus of the six-day, 65km Overland Track, the island's famous long-distance walk, but you don't have to slog it out

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Strahan; Gordon River; road to Queenstown; West Coast Wilderness Railway.

on foot to get there: it's just a few minutes' drive from the township of Derwent Bridge. There's a lovely (short) walk you can do around the lakeshore at Cynthia Bay — if you're lucky you might even see an echidna or platypus. If you want to see more you can take the ferry to the northern end of the lake and take a short walk into the rainforest from there.

The drive from Lake St Clair to Strahan is simply spectacular. The first 80km section winds through the Franklin–Gordon Wild Rivers National Park, where it seems as if a new jagged-edged mountain rises up around every curve of the road.

The contrast when you reach Queenstown is quite shocking. Here, alpine wilderness has been transformed to a moonscape of treeless, eroded hills whose vegetation has been killed by almost 100 years of tree-felling and pollution from smelters, and bushfires (although the vegetation has made a bit of a comeback in recent years). Bizarre as it is, the landscape does have a certain kind of strange and unique beauty, and the steep drive down the mountain's hairpin turns is quite exciting.

It's 37km farther to Strahan, situated beside the sea at the mouth of Macquarie Harbour, the second biggest natural harbour in Australia. This is the jumping-off place for Gordon River Cruises and, if you do only one thing in Strahan, do this. This serenely beautiful riverine wilderness is largely untouched and inaccessible except by air, on foot or via the river. It was preserved thanks to the efforts of conservationists in the early 1980s, who fought vigorously against a proposed hydro-electric dam on the Gordon River. Over three months about 6000 of them blockaded the river and construction roads, mostly at Warners Landing, 6km from the junction of the Franklin and Gordon Rivers. The protest not only saved two of the world's most beautiful rivers, but effectively kick-started the Green movement in Australia. Most cruises include a stop at the former convict settlement of Sarah Island.

Another great way to explore the wild forests of the region is on the West Coast Wilderness Railway, a historic Apt (rack and pinion) steam train trip along a 35km railway of tight curves and spectacular bridges through the dense rainforest and steep gorges between Strahan and Queenstown. Return trips run daily from both towns.

While you're in Strahan, take a drive out to Ocean Beach. Stretching for more than 30km from Macquarie Heads in the south to Trial Harbour in the north, Ocean Beach is the longest beach in Tasmania. Thousands of shearwaters (muttonbirds) breed here during summer and provide an amazing wildlife spectacle each night at dusk as they return from their feeding forays over the ocean. There is a walkway over the dunes to a viewing platform. To get to Ocean Beach, drive out of Strahan towards Zeehan and turn left at the first intersection past the caravan park. Follow this road for 4km and park behind the dunes.

Corinna, around 93km north of Strahan via mostly unsealed roads (allow two hours) and ferry, is one of those secret places that seems to have well and truly slipped beneath the tourist radar, despite being surrounded by some of the most beautiful, ethereal and enchanting rainforest on the planet. Even though the unsealed road is fine for normal cars, it's enough, it seems, to put most people off.

Stop en route at the West Coast Heritage Centre in the small mining township of Zeehan for an excellent look at local history, especially mining. The museum is larger than it looks from the outside with 30 themed exhibits. A highlight is watching an Edwardian film in the Gaiety Theatre, once one of Australia's largest concert halls but now part of the museum. Also worth a look is the Spray Tunnel, a couple of kilometres from town. Shaped like a keyhole, the abandoned railway tunnel that once led to a silver mine is 100 metres long and the ceiling is festooned with glowworms.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Arcadia II, Corinna; Cradle Mountain and Dove Lake walk; Whyte River Walk, Corinna; Pieman Heads.

From Zeehan, it's about an hour's drive to Corinna through beautiful lush rainforest, and you'll need to take the Fatman Barge — the only cable-driven vehicular barge remaining in Tasmania — across the Pieman River to get there. The crossing takes around five minutes. It goes on demand during daylight hours but can only carry one vehicle at a time and is too small for long caravans or motorhomes.

There are no shops in Corinna; in fact, there's not much at all except a pub and some rustic-looking cabins. But it wasn't always this sleepy. When a gold nugget weighing almost 7kg (the biggest ever found in Tasmania) was discovered nearby in 1883, it sparked a huge gold rush, and Corinna boomed. The town boasted more than 30 buildings, including two pubs, one on either side of the Pieman River. The gold rush was short lived, however, and by the early 1900s the town was pretty much abandoned.

Today Corinna is the only surviving remote area historic mining settlement in Tasmania. Only three of the original buildings remain: the old pub, the butcher's shop and a cottage, and all three are available as accommodation, along with the 14 new cabins, called 'wilderness retreats'. There is a network of walking trails, of varying difficulty, which passes just metres from these cabins. One of the best is the hour-long Whyte River walk, which

loops around from the cabins to the barge crossing through a magical forest of myrtle, sassafras, huon pine and fairy-tale fungi. It's a beautiful way to start the day — when the river is like glass, the trees are sheathed in tendrils of mist and fat pademelons are still too sleepy to get out of your way.

The Pieman River is every bit as beautiful as the Gordon River in Strahan and a half-day cruise on the huon-pine *Arcadia II* to Pieman Heads at the river mouth is well worth the splurge. A cheaper DIY alternative is to hire kayaks and head off on your own — the canoe-hire staff will even pick up your kayaks if you want to paddle down the river for a couple of hours then walk back through the rainforest.

From Corinna, head north-east to Cradle Mountain. The drive takes around two hours or so, depending on conditions — beware of wildlife on the road and icy sections in winter.

The craggy peaks of Cradle Mountain are among the most photographed in the country and the valley is the starting point for the famous six-day Overland Track walk to Lake St Clair, which leads

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) View from Marion's Lookout; World Heritage Cruises; Russell Falls, Mount Field National Park; Huon Pine Walk, Corinna.

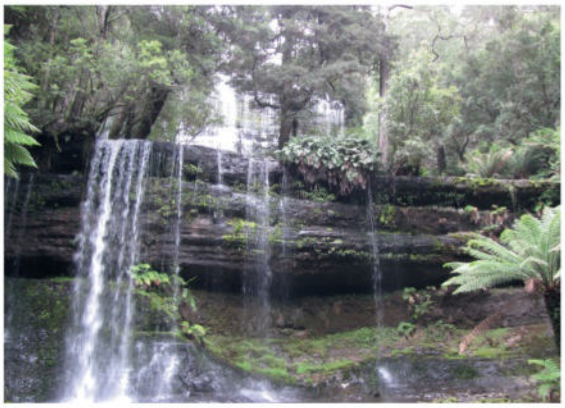
through the heart of some of the continent's finest mountain terrain. Ancient rainforests, alpine heath, buttongrass plains, stands of colourful deciduous beech, icy streams, rocky mountains — including Tassie's highest, Mount Ossa — and a wealth of wildlife are just some of the highlights.

Aside from the Overland Track, there are numerous day walks for all levels of fitness and keen-ness. A favourite is the easy two-hour Dove Lake Loop Track, which takes you under the shadow of Cradle Mountain through the tranquil Ballroom Forest and back along the western shore of the lake. If you're up for a bit of a climb, join the Overlanders on the chain-assisted trek to the top of Marion's Lookout (1223m) at the base of Cradle Mountain. The views from the top over Crater and Dove lakes are superb. Allow around four hours return.

Even if you don't want to walk, take the park shuttle bus from the visitors centre to Dove Lake for spectacular (depending on the weather) views of Cradle Mountain. And don't miss the Wilderness Gallery, next door to Cradle Mountain Hotel. With ten separate gallery rooms, it's the largest privately owned photographic gallery in Australia and all of the exhibits are inspirational — the type of photography that makes you long to step inside the frame and be part of the landscape inside it. While many of the images focus on Tasmanian landscapes, there is also a program of changing exhibitions from around the world, a movie room with all-day screenings of Tasmanian films and a permanent display on the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) which includes recorded footage of the last known tiger and recordings of the stories of old trappers, played in a recreated trappers' hut.

From Cradle Mountain, it will take around two and a half hours to drive to Launceston. Good places to stretch your legs on the way include Sheffield, where almost every wall in the village is covered with bright and colourful murals, and Railton, where many of the front yards and gardens have quirky topiary sculptures. In between the two towns you'll see vast fields of white poppies — Tasmania is the only state in Australia permitted to grow opium poppies as a crop and is one of the world's largest producers of pharmaceutical opium. It's very pretty when the poppies are in flower during the summer months.

You might have only been on the road a week or so, but by the time you get to the riverside city of Launceston, with its waterfront restaurants, museums and wineries, you'll have seen more pristine wilderness than most people, proving that you don't have to be tough and intrepid to go wild in Tasmania.



WHERE TO STAY

Lake St Clair Lodge, Lake St Clair ***lakestclairlodge.com.au***
Strahan Village, Strahan ***strahanvillage.com.au***
Corinna Wilderness Village, Corinna ***corinna.com.au***
Cradle Mountain Lodge, Cradle Mountain ***cradlemountainlodge.com.au***
Peppers Silo Hotel, Launceston ***peppers.com.au/silo***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

View 42° Restaurant & Bar, Strahan ***strahanvillage.com.au/dine/view-42-restaurant-bar***
Hamers Bar & Bistro, Strahan ***strahanvillage.com.au/dine/hamers-bar-bistro***
Tarkine Hotel, Corinna, ***corinna.com.au***
Highland Restaurant, Cradle Mountain Lodge ***cradlemountainlodge.com.au/food-and-wine/highland-restaurant***
Rupert & Hound, Launceston ***rupertandhound.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Mount Field National Park, National Park ***parks.tas.gov.au/explore-our-parks/mount-field-national-park***
The Wall in the Wilderness, Derwent Bridge ***thewalltasmania.com***
Ida Clair Ferry Service, Lake St Clair ***lakestclairlodge.com.au/lake-st-clair-ferry-service***
Lake St Clair National Park, Lake St Clair ***parks.tas.gov.au/explore-our-parks/lake-st-clair***
Gordon River Cruises, Strahan ***gordonrivercruises.com.au & worldheritagecruises.com.au***
West Coast Wilderness Railway, Strahan & Queenstown ***wcwr.com.au***
West Coast Heritage Centre, Zeehan ***wchczeehan.com.au***
Pieman River Cruise, Corinna ***corinna.com.au***
Cradle Mountain, ***parks.tas.gov.au/explore-our-parks/cradle-mountain***
Wilderness Gallery, Cradle Mountain ***wildernessgallery.com.au***

Back to Nature

Wildlife watching takes on a whole new meaning on Victoria's Phillip Island, where personal encounters with some of Australia's cutest critters is a regular occurrence.

PHILLIP ISLAND, VIC | 2-3 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & VISIT VICTORIA

Walking to The Pinnacles

To shoo or not to shoo — that is the question that springs to mind when you're road tripping across Phillip Island. Road signs warn that you should always check under your car for penguins before you drive, but don't offer any helpful advice on what to do if you do find one peeking out from behind your mud flap. Do you shoo or do you just quietly wait for it to waddle away? And what happens if the penguin doesn't want to move?

They might steal the limelight — or moonlight in this case — but there's much more to Phillip Island than just the famous Penguin Parade. Take a drive around the island and you'll discover wild coastlines with spectacular clifftop walking trails, a wealth of wildlife beyond the waddling penguins, great food and wine, and some fantastic family-friendly attractions. Even better? It's all just a 90-minute-drive from Melbourne, which means you can make it a day trip. There's so much to see here, though, that two or three days would be ideal.

Connected to the mainland by bridge at San Remo, Phillip Island — which is called Millowl by the Bunurong people — is 122km south-east of Melbourne via the Monash Freeway (M1) and the South Gippsland and Bass highways.

Call into Artfusion Gallery on the way. It's a sculpture and glass studio and art gallery where you can watch the artists at work and buy their wares at half the price that you'd find them for in Melbourne galleries. You'll find it at the roundabout at Anderson, just before you get to San Remo.

San Remo might not be very far — as the pelican flies — from the bright lights of Melbourne but it has a genuine fishing village vibe. The Fisherman's Co-op at the jetty beside the bridge is the spot to go for fresh fish and chips — or rock lobster — straight off the fishing boat. Time your visit for noon and you can watch the daily free pelican feeding show on the beach next door, where about 30 hungry birds jostle for a fishy feed. There's also a free Fishing Heritage Museum here as well, where you can learn all about the history of the local fishing fleet.

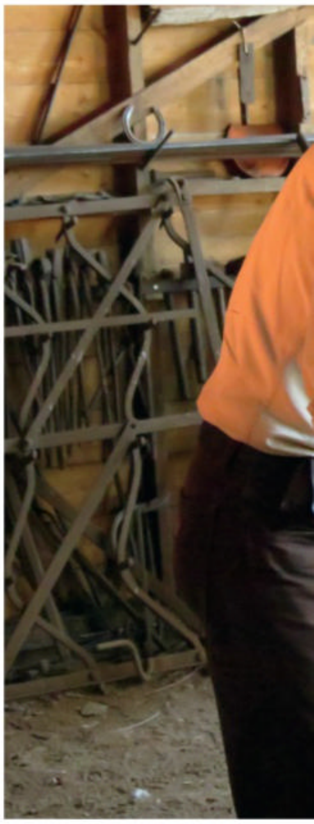
From San Remo it's around a 20-minute-drive to Cowes, the main town on the island, and a farther 15 minutes or so to get to the Penguin Parade at the western tip of the island — but take your time, as there's plenty to see and do along the way.

If you have a sweet tooth, call into the Phillip Island Chocolate Factory — it's on the main road, not long after you've crossed the San Remo bridge. Watch chocolate being made, see the world's largest chocolate waterfall, check out chocolate displays including a model train set and miniature village all made of chocolate, and a life-size chocolate version of Michelangelo's David. There's also, of course, a hard-to-resist chocolate café and shop.

You might have to bribe them away from the chocolate shop, but kids will love Churchill Island Heritage Farm where they can watch cows being milked, sheep being shorn, take a wagon ride and watch a blacksmith at work. The historic houses, which date from the 1850s, are fully furnished and open for self-guided tours. During school holidays there are a range of special activities including old-fashioned games, ranger walks and activity tables.

On a more sombre note, the nearby National Vietnam Veterans Museum is both a memorial and a museum that tells the story of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war, including conscription, with a large collection of artefacts, including helicopters, a bomber and a tank.

Rhyll Inlet is a haven for birdlife, with thousands of pelicans, black swans, gulls and migratory waders. The walking track and boardwalk — which is also suitable for bicycles — provide a great



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Wallaby; heritage displays and demonstrations at Churchill Heritage Farm; Rhyll Pier.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from left) Koala Conservation Centre; Kitty Miller Bay; Cowes.

way to explore the inlet and mangroves without getting your feet wet. You can follow the track and boardwalk all the way from Conservation Hill to the seaside village of Rhyll (allow 90 minutes return) or just do the half-hour mangrove boardwalk.

About halfway between Rhyll and Cowes you can see koalas in the wild at the Koala Conservation Reserve, where two elevated boardwalks let you get close to the koalas perched in the treetops. The reserve also has a breeding program, and if you're lucky you may catch a glimpse of a joey emerging from its mother's pouch as it learns to climb the towering eucalypts to forage for food. Both walks are wheelchair accessible — so good for those pushing prams as well as those on little legs — and both take around 20 minutes. There are also wallabies, echidnas and lots of colourful native birds in the reserve.

Just across the road from the koala reserve the A Maze'N Things theme park is another spot that's always a hit with kids. There's a maze, of course, as well as mini golf and the Magic Manor, which has magic rabbits, a time machine and a flying chandelier, and nothing is quite as it seems. You have to see it to believe it!

Cowes, where you'll find most of the island's shops, cafes and restaurants, also has a lovely north-facing beach — a rarity in Victoria. Flanked by a shady expanse of grass, the beach is a sheltered swimming spot, and there's a fishing jetty nearby.

But no first-time visit to Phillip Island is complete without a ringside seat at the nightly Penguin Parade, when hundreds of little penguins (that's their official name, although they used to be called fairy penguins in less politically correct times) come out of the sea at Summerlands Beach at dusk and waddle up the hill to their burrows. It attracts thousands of visitors each night and is one of Victoria's most popular attractions. Keep an eye on the time because the road to the Penguin Parade and the nearby Nobbies Centre closes one hour before sunset in order to protect the wildlife.

The Nobbies Centre is a five-minute drive beyond the turn-off to the Penguin Parade. It can be tempting to dismiss the Nobbies Centre as just a ticket outlet, tourist information centre and souvenir shop, but the displays inside on the local marine life, including penguins and seals, are really informative.

Australia's largest fur seal colony lives at Seal Rocks, just beyond the headland. Head out to the boardwalk outside: it's a fantastic cliff-top walk along the headland, and if you've got binoculars you'll have a good view of the seals. During big southern swells, the blowhole at the end of the walk puts on an impressive display.

But it's the penguins that steal the show. There are two viewing platforms and a number of tours, but the best is the Penguin Plus — it ensures a prime viewing position, and you'll only have to share the experience with 150 others, rather than the bigger crowds at the main platform. The penguins start arriving at sunset, which in summer is around 9pm, and the lights are turned out 50 minutes after the first penguin arrives, so it can be a late night for little kids. It also gets cold, even in summer, so bring warm clothes, and a cushion or blanket to sit on — those bench seats get hard after an hour or so! Make sure you book your tickets ahead of time and arrive at least an hour before sunset, or you may find yourself without a seat. That said, some positions on the boardwalk leading down to the viewing platforms can give you a better view of the penguins as they head up the hill to their burrows. When you leave, don't forget to check under your car for penguins and keep an eye out for wildlife on the drive back to your accommodation.

The island's south coast is wilder and emptier than the north. The beaches along the stretch are great for beachcombing, and at low tide you can see the rusting remains of the SS Speke,

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Penguin Parade; Seal Rocks; The Nobbies.

wrecked on the rock shelf on the east side of Kitty Miller Bay in 1906 enroute to Sydney from Peru. Don't miss Pyramid Rocks, around halfway along the southern coast, off Back Beach Road. It's an easy 10-minute walk — much of it along wooden boardwalks — to the lookout platform, which provides great views not only over the triangular pile of rocks that gives this scenic point its name, but also north and south along the coast. The rocks are the remnant of a lava flow that once formed a land bridge to the point. You can also follow a cliff-top trail to Berry Beach; go early in the morning and you're almost guaranteed to see wallabies on the track.

Home to the Australian Motorcycle Grand Prix each October, as well as the World Superbike Championship and the Supercars Championship, the Phillip Island Circuit (around halfway between the Penguin Parade and San Remo) is one of the most scenic racetracks in the world, although it's unlikely that the racers have much time to admire the panoramic ocean views; it's also one of the one of the fastest tracks in the world. There's a

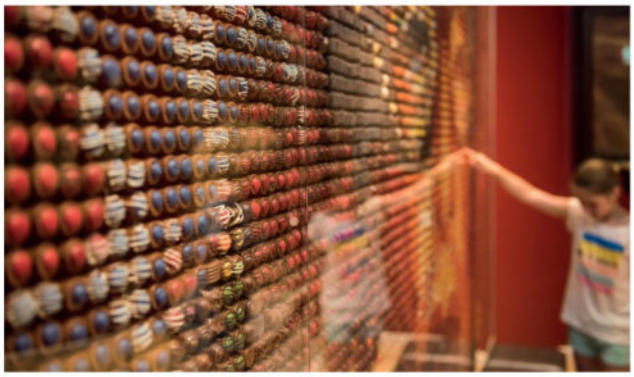
THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) Cape Woolamai; Pyramid Rocks.

display on the history of motor sport at the track. There are also racing simulators, and you can take a guided circuit tour, ride a go-kart or buckle up for a few hot laps with a racing driver.

Penguins aren't the only birds to call Phillip Island home. Each year, 23 million short-tailed shearwaters (also known as muttonbirds) migrate to southern Australia from the Bering Sea near Alaska, an epic 15,000km journey. Around a million of them arrive on Phillip Island in late September to mate then stay until April, raising their chicks. Watching them arrive en masse at sunset is quite a spectacle. The best place to see them is Cape Woolamai just south of San Remo.

Cape Woolamai is also a good spot to see humpback whales on their annual migration between May and October, and for stargazing — if you're lucky, you may even be treated to a showing of the Southern Aurora and Aurora Australis (aka the southern lights). Phillip Island may not be very far from the metropolis of Melbourne, but it feels much wilder.

THIS PAGE: (Clockwise from above) National Vietnam Veterans Museum; Phillip Island go-karts; Phillip Island Winery; Phillip Island Chocolate Factory; San Remo Fisherman's Co-op.



WHERE TO STAY

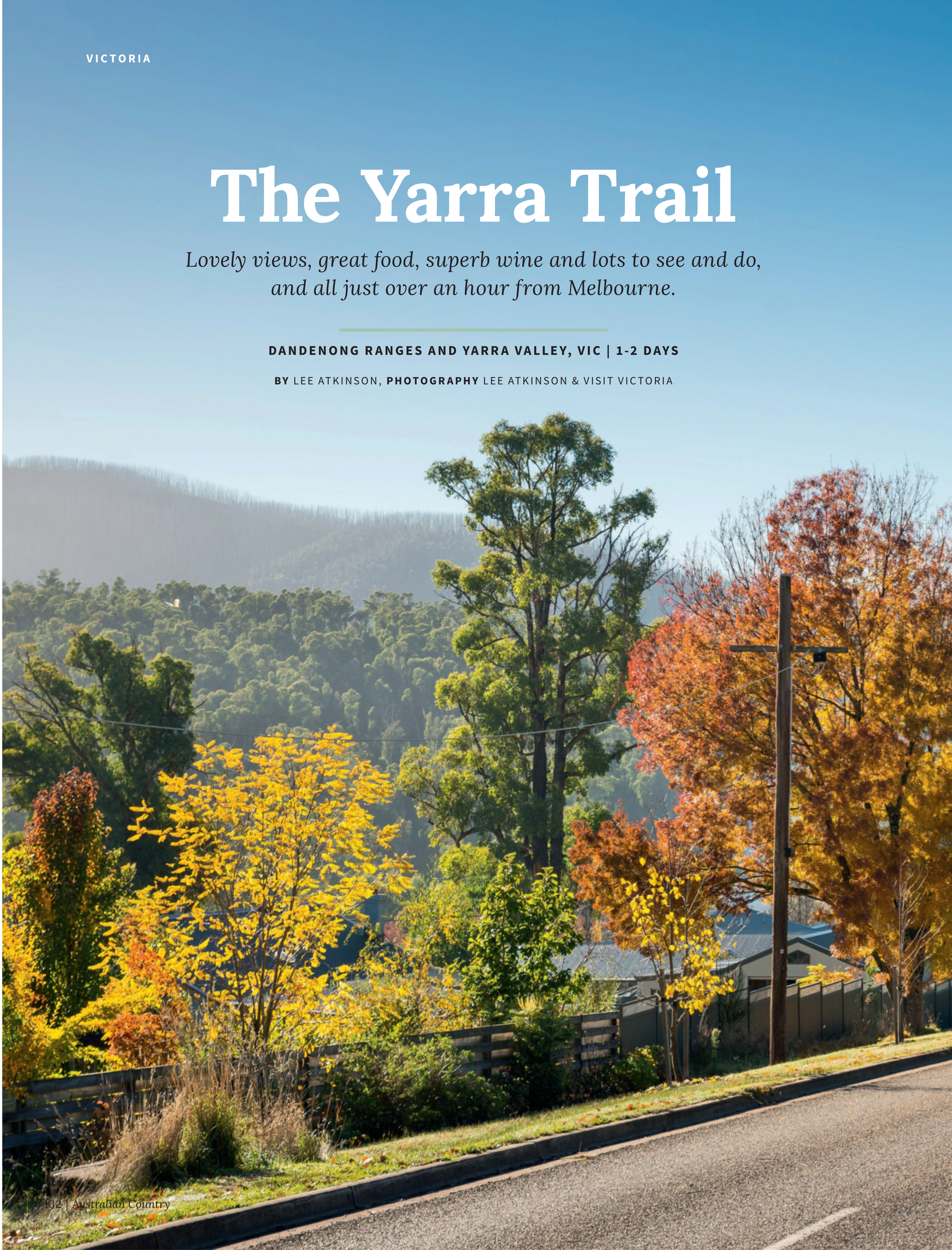
Silverwater Resort, San Remo ***silverwaterresort.com.au***
The North Pier Hotel, Cowes ***northpierhotel.com.au***
Five Acres, Ventnor ***fiveacres.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Saltwater Phillip Island, Newhaven ***saltwaterphillipisland.com.au***
Beach HQ Restaurant & Bar, Cowes ***beachhq.com.au***
Grenache Wine Bar, Cowes ***grenachebar.com.au***
Phillip Island Winery, Ventnor ***phillipislandwinery.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Artfusion Gallery, Anderson ***artfusionstudioandgallery.com***
National Vietnam Veterans Museum, Newhaven ***vietnamvetsmuseum.org***
Phillip Island Chocolate Factory, Newhaven ***phillipislandchocolatefactory.com.au***
Churchill Island Heritage Farm, Churchill Island ***penguins.org.au/attractions/churchill-island***
Koala Conservation Reserve, Phillip Island Rd ***penguins.org.au/attractions/koala-reserve***
A Maze'N Things, Phillip Island Rd ***amazenthings.com.au***
Penguin Parade, Summerlands ***penguins.org.au***
Nobbies Centre, Summerlands ***penguins.org.au/attractions/nobbies-centre***
Seal Cruise, Cowes ***penguins.org.au/attractions/seal-cruise***
Phillip Island Circuit, Ventnor ***phillipislandcircuit.com.au***



The Yarra Trail

Lovely views, great food, superb wine and lots to see and do, and all just over an hour from Melbourne.

DANDENONG RANGES AND YARRA VALLEY, VIC | 1-2 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & VISIT VICTORIA

Road to Marysville

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Mountain Ash; Puffing Billy Railway.

Forget big concrete bananas, giant fibreglass pineapples and the big apple: the Dandenong Ranges on the outskirts of Melbourne are home to the tallest flowering plants on the planet, the mighty *Eucalyptus regnans*, or mountain ash. And it's not just one, but whole forests of this towering tree, some more than 100m high, sheltering misty gullies of lush tree ferns and framing historic cool-climate gardens.

The Dandenongs and Yarra Valley make one of the most popular weekend getaway destinations for Melbournians. Drive through the lush rainforest and the vine-coated hills and you'll soon see why. This leisurely loop drive can be done in a day, but with so much to see, eat and drink along the way, why not take your time and make a weekend of it?

To get to the Dandenongs take the M1 out of Melbourne toward Belgrave or Ferntree Gully.

You don't have to be a kid to enjoy a ride on Puffing Billy, a century-old steam train still running on its original mountain track from Belgrave to Gembrook, although it's always a big hit with little ones. The traditional way to ride the train is sitting on the sills of the open-sided carriages and even the locals, who see the train every day, will stop to wave madly as it trundles by. Built in 1900, the narrow-gauge railway line was used to transport goods and produce from local farms to and from Melbourne. The 24.5km line winds its way through some of the most picturesque scenery close to Melbourne — the towering mountain ash forests and fern gullies of the Dandenongs — and was one of the most popular excursions for Melbournians before motor cars took over in the 1920s.

In 1953, a landslide blocked the track and the railway was officially closed. A group of enthusiastic volunteers banded together to build new stations and bridges and re-lay the tracks, gradually opening more and more of the line until finally, in 1998, the line was completely reopened to Gembrook. You can start the journey at either Belgrave or Lakeside, around halfway along the line — a full trip from Belgrave to Gembrook takes around two hours one way. There's a variety of tickets available, including first class with three-course lunch and wine, as well as special events such as dinner trains, jazz trains and murder-mystery dinners.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Puffing Billy Railway; Dandenong Ranges Botanic Garden.

Garden lovers will find plenty of reasons to linger near the town of Olinda, a popular spot with boutiques, antique stores and cafes. The Dandenong Ranges Botanic Garden on the Georgian Road are home to 15,000 rhododendrons, 12,000 azaleas, 3000 camellias and 250,000 daffodils (at last count). In spring and autumn, the gardens are clothed in colour and perfume. They also feature moorlands, rock gardens, fern gullies and a cloud forest collection showcasing endangered tropical plants from the wet tropics in Queensland. It's also home to the new Chelsea Australian Garden, a recreation (albeit 20 times the size of the original) of the award-winning native garden that was the first ever Australian entry to win gold (and Best in Show) at the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show in London.

Head up to the summit of Mount Dandenong to the lookout at Sky High Mount Dandenong, where you'll find plenty of things to do beyond staring at the amazing view — explore the Sky High Maze, gardens,

tree sculptures and forest trail walks or lunch at the cafe with Melbourne spread out below you.

As you head north towards Yarra Glen and Healesville on the Maroondah Highway, you'll start to see more vines covering the slopes as you head into the famous Yarra Valley wine region.

If you like eating and drinking, follow one of the Yarra Valley-themed food trails which crisscross the entire region. There's a cider-and-ale trail, a U-Pick trail (orchards and fruit farms where you can pick fruit) and several wine trails —there's even a 'top picnic spot' trail. Along the way, you'll find dozens of producers whose foods feature in local and city restaurants — free-range eggs, honey, fruit, berries, herbs, cheese, game, pasta, preserves, trout, clotted cream, chocolates and ice cream. Before you set out, check the opening days of the local markets, where stalls are piled high with food, much of it organic. As for the wines, the area is one of the world's best cool-climate wine districts, specialising in sparkling wines, chardonnay and pinot noir. There are more than 160 wineries and vineyards in the valley, ranging from stunning multimillion dollar tourism operations to boutique, family-operated businesses, and around 90 of them have cellar doors that offer a warm welcome to wine-lovers, and many have restaurants and accommodation, too.

One not to miss is Yering Station. Established in 1838, it' the oldest vineyard in Victoria, and worth a stop on any trip through the Yarra. Tour the winemaking area; stroll around the historic buildings; enjoy a coffee and rich chocolate brownie or glass of wine in one of the deep couches overlooking the vines in the Garden Bar; browse the produce room with its shelves groaning under the weight of local produce from the Yarra Valley Regional Food Group; or check out the art in the cellar door gallery.

fraga's
CAFE

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) High Street, Marysville; Yering Station vineyard; Healesville Harvest, Yarra Valley.

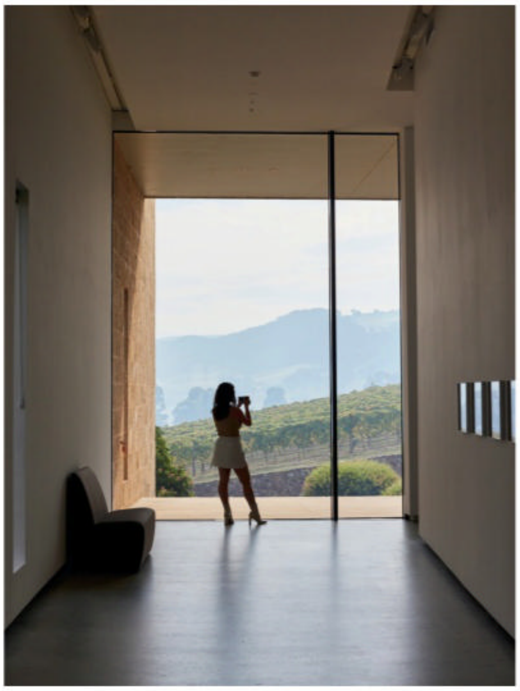
If you find a glass of bubbles hard to resist (and who doesn't?) put Chandon, near Coldstream — maker of some of Australia's most iconic sparkling wines — on the top of your tasting list. Guided tastings of the range of sparkling wines are available, as well as 'Behind the Bubbles' wine blending sessions, seven-course degustation dining extravaganzas, sparkling brunches and even garden spritz picnics.

If you can't decide on who's going to be the designated driver that must forgo any wine tasting, there's a range of wine tours available.

Another great reason to turn this trip into a weekend away, beyond having more time for more food and wine, is the opportunity to catch the sunrise over the vineyards on an early-morning balloon ride. There are several companies who offer champagne breakfast sunrise balloon flights over the Yarra Valley, but it's an early start and even in summer it's brisk at that time of the day, so come prepared with a beanie and warm jacket.

About 6km before you get to Healesville on the Healesville–Yarra Glen Road is one of the hidden gems of the Yarra Valley: the TarraWarra Museum of Art. Housing one of the most significant collections of modern Australian art, this gallery includes works by outstanding Australian artists from 1950 onwards, including works by Fred Williams, Clifton Pugh, Albert Tucker, John Perceval and John Olsen, displayed in a series of seasonal exhibitions in a stunningly designed gallery space where even the view is framed as art. Exhibitions change regularly, and there's also a programme of events, workshops and performances, with lots of activities for kids during school holiday times.

Healesville's most famous attraction is the Healesville Sanctuary, which was first established in 1934. Not just another zoo, this conservation park is home to more than 200 species of Australian wildlife, all housed in open-air and open-range exhibits, many so cleverly constructed that it's almost impossible to see the enclosure boundaries. Highlights include bird-of-prey flight demonstrations, a daily reptile show and the 'platypusary', where you can get up very close and personal with Australia's most elusive monotreme, strapping on waders and feeding platypus with a keeper on a Platypus Discovery experience. The sanctuary also looks after more than 2000 rescued animals each year, and you can watch the vets and keepers caring for their patients.



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Healesville Sanctuary; Black Spur; TarraWarra Museum of Art; hot air ballooning over the Yarra Valley; Steavenson Falls, Cherry Hill; Marysville.

The Yarra Ranges are a scenic backdrop to the vine-clad valleys as the road heads up into the hills, and this next section of this road trip is one of the most photographed pieces of road in the state. The Black Spur between Healesville and Narbethong is a narrow 10km section of the Maroondah Highway that winds its way up into the Great Dividing Range through towering mountain ash and lush green fern forests — if it feels oddly familiar it's because it's a favourite filming location. This area, along with the town of Marysville, was devastated by the tragic Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, which claimed 173 lives. Although you can still occasionally see glimpses of the charred remains of some trees, the forest is lush and green with regrowth.

Continue on to Marysville, which has been rebuilt since the fires, and visit Steavenson Falls, which at 82m are Victoria's highest cascades. If you are staying overnight, come back after dark when the falls are floodlit.

If you're not in a hurry, take Lady Talbot Forest Drive from Marysville. It's a 46km-long loop though the rainforest in Yarra Ranges National Park. There are several walking trails that will lead you through old-growth myrtle beech forest to waterfalls tumbling over huge granite boulders and through dense rainforest. It's a dirt road, which is fine for conventional 2WDs in dry weather, but if it's been raining recently it's best in a 4WD.

From Marysville it's an easy — but very scenic — 135km drive back to Melbourne via the Woods Point Road, which runs east from Marysville through Yarra Ranges National Park and along the Yarra River to Warburton. Assuming, of course, that you don't get distracted by some of the farm-gate stalls or cellar doors along the way.

Cherry, cherry delicious
Cherry, cherry delicious

WHERE TO STAY

Balgownie Estate, Yarra Glen ***balgownie.com/yarra-valley***
Chateau Yering Hotel, Yering ***chateauyering.com.au***
Healesville Apartments, Healesville ***healesvilleapartments.com.au***
Peppers Marysville, Marysville ***peppers.com.au/marysville***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Sky High Mount Dandenong, ***skyhighmtdandenong.com.au***
Yarra Valley Dairy, Yering ***yvd.com.au***
Healesville Hotel, Healesville ***healesvillehotel.com***
Innocent Bystander, Healesville ***innocentbystander.com.au***
Chandon, Coldstream ***chandon.com.au***
Yering Station, Yering ***yering.com***

WHAT TO DO

Dandenong Ranges Botanic Garden, Olinda ***parks.vic.gov.au/places-to-see/parks/dandenong-ranges-botanic-garden***
Sky High Mount Dandenong, ***skyhighmtdandenong.com.au***
TarraWarra Museum of Art, near Healesville ***twma.com.au***
Healesville Sanctuary, Healesville ***zoo.org.au/healesville***
Puffing Billy, Belgrave ***puffingbilly.com.au***
Yarra Valley Food Trail ***yarravalleyfood.com.au***
Cherry Hill Orchards, Coldstream ***cherryhill.com.au***
Hot Air Ballooning, Balgownie Estate, Yarra Glen ***globalballooning.com.au***
Tesselar Tulip Festival, Sept/Oct, Silvan ***tulipfestival.com.au***
Yarra Valley wine tours, ***visityarravalley.com.au/see-and-do/tours***

The Gibb River Road

Australia's most celebrated outback track is a road trip for those that like wild adventures.

THE KIMBERLEY, WA | 10-12 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

There are some places that are larger than life, and the Kimberley is one of them. Less than 25,000 people live in this remote north-western corner of Australia, an area bigger than Germany. It is a rough and rugged but breathtakingly beautiful place — a wild and sparsely inhabited wilderness. It is one of Australia's true last frontiers, where every day is an adventure, and driving the Gibb River Road is one of the best ways to really experience it.

The Gibb River Road starts just west of Kununurra and spears through the heart of the Kimberley to meet the sea at Derby. It's a dusty trail of almost 700km across boab-studded savannah lands, past weather-beaten ranges where rivers tumble over cliffs and wind their way through deep rock gorges that are billions of years old. It takes you across wide waterways that can only be crossed during the dry season between May and November. It's crocodile country, but there are plenty of places to cool off, and floating in a waterhole surrounded by rock walls decorated in ancient rock art after a long, hot dusty drive is one of the things that makes this extraordinary part of the world so special.

It takes some planning, though, because you'll be traversing one of the most isolated corners of the country. To drive the Gibb you'll need a four-wheel-drive, and if you are towing, your caravan or camper trailer will need to be very robust — it's not a difficult track but it can be bumpy, and the roadside is littered with vans and trailers that have been shaken to bits by the corrugations. You'll need to be pretty much self-sufficient, carry spares and tools, and be willing to camp most nights. There are two roadhouses on the Gibb (Mt Barnett and Imintji), and fuel is available at Drysdale River Homestead on the way to Mitchell Plateau — the longest distance between fuel stops for petrol vehicles is around 470km (from Derby to Mt Barnett Roadhouse via Bell Gorge and Windjana Gorge) as Imintji Roadhouse sells diesel only. The longest distance between diesel fuel stops is 395km (Derby to Imintji via the gorges along the way). There is no LPG gas and no supermarkets on the Gibb. The two roadhouses sell very basic supplies, like UHT milk and frozen bread, but that's about it. There is also no mobile phone coverage on the Gibb, anywhere. Don't let any of that put you off, however, because this is a once-in-a-lifetime trip that really is worth the effort, and this is some of the most magnificent country you'll ever see.

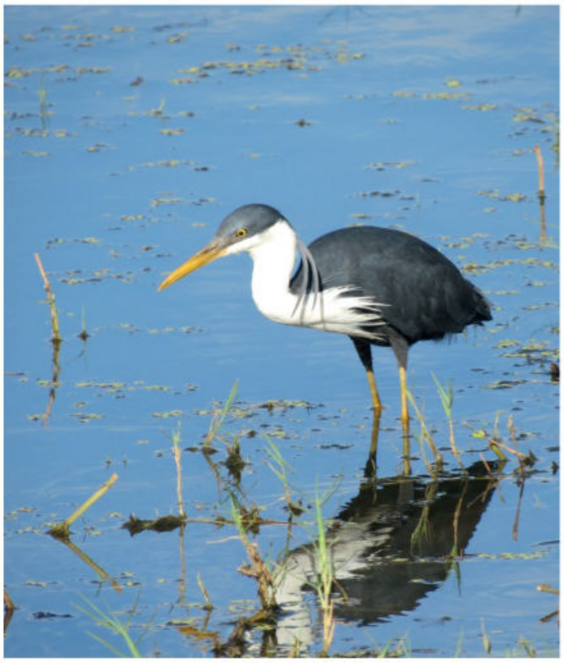
For most people, the Gibb River Road starts (or ends) in Kununurra (827km south-west of Darwin, and a 5-6 hour drive from Katherine), but officially the 'road' starts at the port at Wyndham, around 100km to the west. The Kimberley is cattle country, and the Gibb River Road was originally built as a beef road linking the vast cattle stations

Pentecost River

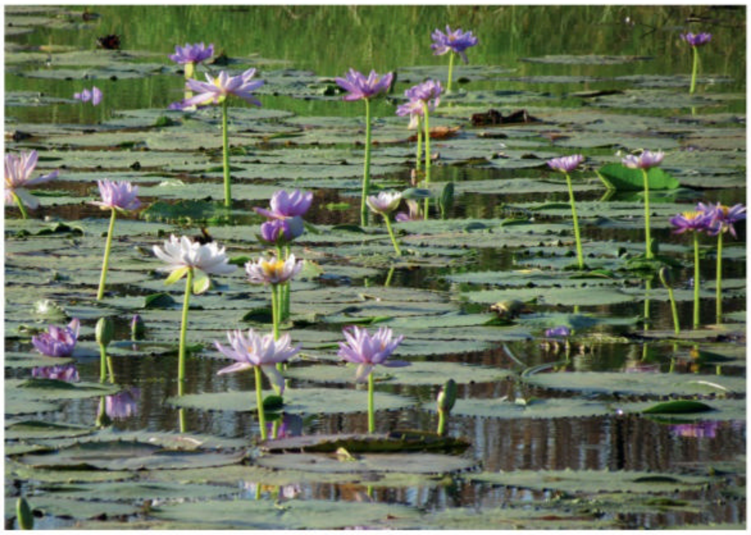
along it to meatworks and port facilities in Derby and Wyndham at either end.

Take the back road from Kununurra to Wyndham via Parry Creek to see some impressively big boabs. Related to — but not the same as — the African baobab, the boab is found only in the Kimberley and can live more than 1500 years. Unlike Kununurra, which was built in the 1960s to service the Ord River Irrigation Project and is very neat and tidy, Wyndham, which was established in 1886 after gold was found in Halls Creek, reeks with character. The ramshackle historic port is lined with boabs and crumbling wooden shopfronts are emblazoned with the fading names of Chinese shopkeepers from the past — it's easy to imagine that this was what Broome might have been like in the 1970s before the tourism boom.

Drive up to the Five Rivers Lookout at the top of the Bastion Range for a sensational view over the Cambridge Gulf, where the Ord, Forest, King, Durack and Pentecost rivers combine — it's a great spot to watch the sunset. If you're a birdwatcher you'll love Marlgu Billabong, home to a big resident crocodile and a fabulous array of birdlife.



THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) The Bastion Five Rivers Lookout, Wyndham; wetlands; Pied Heron in Marlgu Billabong, Wyndham; King River Road, Wyndham; boab.

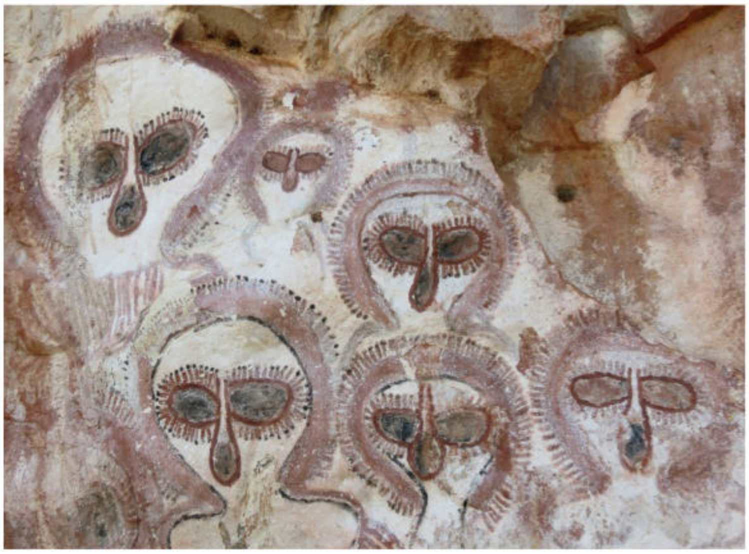


THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) El Questro Wilderness Park; Chamberlain Gorge and Zebedee Thermal Springs, El Questro; Kimberley Rose; Emma Falls, El Questro.

These days there are more camper trailers and off-road caravans than cattle trucks on the Gibb, and almost every station along its length welcomes visitors, and most offer some truly spectacular gorges and swimming holes.

The best known of all of these stations is El Questro, a 283,000ha spread popular with tour groups and day trippers from Kununurra — it's 83km from town, and the road is sealed all the way to the station turnoff. With three levels of accommodation, plus three restaurants, bars, swimming pools, 4WD tours, fishing trips, horse treks, river cruises and helicopter flights, it's more resort than cattle station. Must see spots include Emma Gorge, an achingly beautiful pool surrounded by towering 120-metre-high red rock walls, over which spills Emma Falls from high above, and Zebedee Thermal Springs, naturally warm pools hidden amongst sheer cliffs and ancient palms, which is perfect for a long soak.

Just across the Pentecost River from El Questro, Home Valley is owned and operated by the Balanggarra Traditional Custodians. It's huge — 3.5 million acres — and activities



include horse riding, helicopter flights, fishing, gorge walks and 4WD tours. Like at El Questro, there's a range of accommodation as well as a campground, all clustered around the Dusty Bar & Grill. Don't be surprised if the landscape looks kind of familiar — Baz Luhrmann filmed much of his epic movie, *Australia*, here. If you enjoy tours and creature comforts, it's worth allowing a couple of days at each station.

Should the craving for a cup of tea with scones, jam and cream strike, Ellenbrae Station, around two hours drive farther down the Gibb, serves them in the garden of their cattle station homestead.

You'll need to allow two days travelling time each way to drive the 240km track to the Mitchell Plateau through several creek crossings, thick red bulldust and corrugations that can shake even the toughest gear to bits (air down your tyres), but the dramatic three-tiered Punamii-Uunpuu (Mitchell Falls) is a highlight of any trip along the Gibb River Road.

The five-hour walk to Punamii-Uunpuu (Mitchells Falls) is a strenuous trek from the camping area across rough and rocky country, passing by Little Mertens Falls and Big Mertens Falls along the way — carry more water than you'll think you need. Saltwater crocodiles inhabit the area, so the pools below the falls are off limits, but you can swim at Little Mertens Falls. You can also take a scenic helicopter flight over the plateau and falls — the office and helipad is at the Mitchell Falls Campground.

Camping is available enroute at Drysdale River Station — home to one of Australia's most remote beer gardens — or beside the King Edward River: the national park campground has good swimming and is a short drive from two very impressive rock art sites with both Wandjina (wide-eyed, lightning-crowned spirits that control the weather and created the landscape of the far north-west) and Gwion Gwion figures — previously called Bradshaw figures, they pre-date European rock paintings by thousands of years.

Back on the Gibb, there's more extraordinary rock art to be found at Mount Elizabeth Station, a working cattle station around 40km east of Mt Barnett Roadhouse — the homestead is 30km from the turn-off. The 10km track from the homestead to Wunnamurra Gorge is not for the faint-hearted — it's rocky and gnarly and very steep in sections — although it's really only the last kilometre and a half that is seriously daunting, and plenty of people pull over and walk in. It's worth it; the gorge, which you climb down into by a ladder, is a large semi-circular basin flanked by a sandy beach with a deep pool fed by a waterfall that you can swim beneath. There's no clearly marked track, but if you

follow the river downstream on the left-hand side for a few hundred metres — you'll need to rock-hop a bit — you'll come to a large rocky overhang covered with sacred Wandjina figures, kangaroos and other beasts. Another gorgeous spot to cool off — and much easier to get to — is the beach on the Hann River, a short drive from the homestead.

The Gibb has some of the country's best natural swimming pools with dozens scattered all along its length, many on private property. Mt Barnett Roadhouse, one of just two roadhouses along the Gibb that sells fuel and basic supplies, is also home to Manning Gorge. It's at the end of a fairly strenuous one-hour walk which includes crossing the Manning Creek — either by swimming the 100m length or using a rope-guided dinghy — along the way. It's private property, so you'll need to pay an entrance fee at the Mt Barnett Roadhouse before you head to the gorge.

If that sounds a bit like too much hard work Galvans Gorge is a 15-minute drive west of the roadhouse. It is free to visit and just a five-minute walk from the Gibb and features the full Kimberley trifecta with a waterfall, boabs and a rock art gallery.

Another good swimming spot is at Dalmanyi (Bell Gorge) in Wunaamin Ranges Conservation Park, where the Isdell River slashes its way through the mountains forming a series of cascading

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Freshwater crocodiles, Windjana Gorge; Wunnamurra Gorge, Mt Elizabeth Station; Windjana Gorge; Galvans Gorge.

waterfalls and deep plunge pools. A farther 95km west, Bandilngan (Windjana Gorge) is an ancient coral reef, eroded by the Lennard River to create a wide, 100m-high gorge that cuts through the limestone of the Napier Range, exposing countless fossils. Don't be tempted to take a dip, though, because the water is home to lots of freshwater crocodiles. There is a 7km return walk along the length of the gorge beside the river where you can get a close-up look at the gorge's resident fruit bats, corellas and crocodiles all basking in the sun.

Bandilngan (Windjana Gorge) is 145km from Derby, and the Gibb turns to bitumen about halfway along the way, which can feel super smooth and very fast after the bumps and bulldust of the Gibb.

Don't be tempted to just hightail it to Broome though; Derby is home to the Mowanjum Aboriginal Art and Culture Centre, one of the best First Nations art centres on the Gibb. Here Worrorra, Ngarinyin and Wunumbal artists not only create, exhibit and sell some astonishing art, but the Mowanjum Museum tells the stories and traditions behind the region's culture, art and history, and is a brilliant place to put into perspective everything you've seen on the rock walls during your time on the Gibb.

Derby is also good base for scenic flights over the magnificent Buccaneer Archipelago, a beautiful area consisting of some 800 to 1000 rocky islands surrounded by turquoise water, part of a drowned coastline. The area has huge tidal ranges of up to 12 metres, creating such natural phenomena as the famous horizontal waterfall in Talbot Bay, caused by the differential created when the tide flows between narrow island gaps. Accessible only by boat or plane, it makes a fitting finale to one of outback Australia's greatest driving adventures.

www.horizontalfallsadventures.com.a

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) El Questro Wilderness Park; Imintji Campground, Gibb River Road; Mowanjum Art and Cultural Centre off the Gibb River Road, Derby; Windjana Gorge; Buccaneer Archipelago.

WHERE TO STAY

El Questro Wilderness Park, 1 Gibb River Road, ***elquestro.com.au***
Home Valley Station, 2hr west of Kununurra, ***home-valley.com.au***
Drysdale River Station, Kalumburu Road, ***drysdaleriver.com.au***
Ellenbrae Station, 230kms west of Kununurra, ***ellenbraestation.com.au***
Mount Elizabeth Station, midway between Kununurra and Derby ***mtelizabethstationstay.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

The Swinging Arm Bar and Grill, El Questro ***elquestro.com.au/stay/the-station***
Dusty Bar & Grill, Home Valley Station ***home-valley.com.au/#dusty***
Ellenbrae Station, 230kms west of Kununurra, ***ellenbraestation.com.au***

WHAT TO DO

Scenic flights and helicopter tours, El Questro ***elquestro.com.au/experience#scenic-air***
Chamberlain Gorge cruises, El Questro ***elquestro.com.au/experience#boat-cruises***
Ngauwudu Road Zone pass, Mitchell Plateau ***wunambalgaambera.org.au/visitors/uunguu-visitor-pass***
Helicopter flights, Mitchell Falls ***helispirit.com.au***
Dalmanyi (Bell Gorge), WunaaminConservation Park ***exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au/park/wunaamin-conservation-park***
Bandilngan (Windjana Gorge) National Park, ***exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au/park/bandilngan-windjana-gorge-national-park***
Mowanjum Museum, Derby ***mowanjumarts.com***
Horizontal Falls Seaplane Adventures, Derby ***horizontalfallsadventures.com.au***

The Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse

Cape to Cape

The Margaret River area is famous for its wine – but it's also got beautiful beaches, caves, forests, whales and coastal walking trails.

SOUTH-WEST WA | 2-3 DAYS

BY LEE ATKINSON, **PHOTOGRAPHY** LEE ATKINSON & TOURISM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Think Margaret River and most people automatically think 'great wine'. And rightly so. But the Margaret River region, a wild knob of land jutting into the sea off the bottom corner of WA, crowned in the north by Cape Naturaliste and Cape Leeuwin in the south, is not just home to some of the finest wines produced in Australia; it's also got some of the best karri forests in Western Australia, a wealth of art galleries and legendary surfing beaches.

Perth to Margaret River is around a three-hour drive, but there are plenty of reasons to take your time.

Make your first port of call the port of Fremantle. On the mouth of the Swan River just 20km south of Perth, Fremantle — aka Freo — has a thriving cafe culture, popular markets, boutique shopping, museums, art galleries and a relaxed coastal vibe. It's also one of the oldest European settlements in Western Australia and one of the best-preserved 19th century seaports anywhere. More than 150 buildings are classified by the National Trust, including the oldest public building in Western Australia, a 12-sided tower at the end of High Street on Arthur Head that was built as a gaol in 1831. Called the Round House, it's open daily and entry is free.

Built by convicts in the 1850s and home to the state's worst criminals until 1991, Fremantle Prison is WA's only World Heritage-listed building. There are a range of tours available, including a Great Escapes Tour where you can learn all about the various successful and unsuccessful escape attempts, including the fascinating story of six Irish Fenians (Irish Republicans) who managed not only to get out of gaol but sail away in a waiting ship, the *Catalpa*. They headed to the USA and received a hero's welcome in 1876. Other tours include an underground tour of tunnels and submerged passageways (by boat) and a rather spooky nighttime torchlight tour.

Fremantle's favourite son is Bon Scott, lead singer of AC/DC from 1974 until his death in 1980. Although born in Scotland, Scott lived in Fremantle as a teenager and even spent some time as a guest in Fremantle Prison. His grave site in Fremantle cemetery is visited by thousands of Acca Dacca fans each year and was given a heritage listing in 2006. In 2008, a life-size bronze statue of a singing Scott standing on an amplifier in trademark skin-tight jeans was erected at Fremantle Fishing Boat Harbour. The Fishing Boat Harbour is also the place to go for super-fresh seafood — try Cicerello's. It's been serving up fish and chips since 1903. Check out the aquariums

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Boranup Forest Drive, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park; Tunnel tour, Fremantle Prison; Fremantle; whale watching near Cosy Corner in Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Busselton jetty; autumn vines; Voyager Estate; Margaret River Farmers Market.

while you're there; the 50 different species of fish were all collected in Fremantle waters (don't worry, they are for show, not for eating!).

Continue south past a series of beautiful white sand beaches to Rockingham, where you can swim with sea lions, dive with dolphins, kayak with seals at Seal Island or hang out with penguins at Penguin Island. You'll find more beautiful beaches in Bunbury, as well as lots of great street and public art and WA's largest regional art gallery, and another chance to get up close and personal with wild dolphins in Bunbury's Koombana Bay as well.

Stretch your legs at Busselton by strolling along the 2km-long heritage-listed wooden jetty — the longest timber-piled jetty in the Southern Hemisphere. If you don't want to walk, there's a miniature train. A bonus if you're travelling with kids — or it's just not swimming weather — is that you don't have to know how to swim to go underwater at Busselton. At the underwater observatory at the end of the jetty you can take a guided tour and descend eight metres below the surface to an observation chamber where you can gaze out at vividly coloured corals, sponges, fish and other sea creatures. It's one of just six underwater observatories in the world, and the jetty piles have created a vast artificial reef (snorkelling tours are also available). In summer school holidays, if you time your visit right, kids may well spot a 'mermaid' or two.

Although you can continue to follow the coast south from Busselton, head inland to Margaret River on the Bussell Highway instead, and base yourself in or near Margaret River township as you explore the area: allow at least one day for the south and one for the north.

If you like food and wine you'll love this part of the WA — local specialities, other than wine, include olives and olive oils, truffles and apples, oysters, chocolate and cheese. Free gourmet food guides are available at visitor centres. Margaret River Farmers Market is every Saturday morning in the TAFE grounds just south of the township on the Bussell Highway.

But it's the wine that most people come to Margaret River to try. The region produces less than 3 per cent of Australia's overall wine but more than 25 per cent of the country's premium wine, so it's definitely quality over quantity. Two of the most popular cellar doors are just a few minutes south of the Margaret River township, on Stevens Road. Leeuwin Estate Winery is set in bushland and constructed of natural timber, wrought iron and long sweeping curves of corrugated iron; like many of the wineries in Margaret River, it also has an art gallery. Practically next door is Voyager Estate, with its faux Cape Dutch architecture and extensive formal gardens. Both wineries have excellent restaurants and offer a range of winery and tasting tours at their cellar doors.

Before being known as a gourmet food and wine destination, Margaret River was a chilled-out surfing town with a hippie culture, and you can still find

THE
FARM HOUSE
Butchers
Small Goods Makers
Arkady Lamb
Big Red Pork

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Whale watching near Busselton; The Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse; views on the Cape to Cape Track; Naturaliste Lighthouse.

traces of its surfie past at any number of surf shops and surf breaks in the area. Much of the coastline is protected as part of Leeuwin–Naturaliste National Park, which stretches 120km from Bunker Bay in the north to Augusta in the south. Even if you don't surf, finding a nice spot to sit and watch the experts carve up some truly impressive waves is a fabulous way to spend some time. Famous breaks with big waves (and easy-to-get-to good vantage points) include the Margaret River Main Break at Surfers Point between the Margaret River mouth and Prevelly, Injidup Beach, Coaramup Bay near Gracetown, Smiths Beach and Yallingup, although locals will tell you there are more than 75 breaks between the capes. You may even be lucky enough to see dolphins riding the waves as well.

The best way to explore the region is along Caves Road, a 110km scenic drive that stretches from cape to cape. The township of Margaret River is roughly in the middle. You can also walk it: the Cape to Cape trail is a 140km trail between the two capes with beautiful coastal scenery and wildflowers from August to November. If you don't fancy doing the whole thing, you can join the track at various spots along the way and just do a couple of hours.

In the north, Caves Road begins at Cape Naturaliste. Take a tour of the lighthouse here or walk around the headland to enjoy views of the coastline and, depending on the time of year, possibly spot some migrating whales. Thousands of whales — humpbacks, southern rights and even the rare and endangered blue whale, the world's largest animal — journey along the south-western coast on their way to and from the warm breeding grounds of the Kimberley coast and the Antarctic, often sheltering in the bays to rest with their calves. The best time to see them is during the winter months through to early spring — May to September — and the best time of day to spy these beauties is usually around midday.

Not long after Gracetown — a lovely spot for a stroll along the rocks and white sand beach lapped by turquoise water — the road cuts through the heart of the main wine-producing area. There are around 50 wineries clumped together in a stretch of around 15km.

Take a detour off Caves Road to wind your way through the Boranup Karri Forest on Boranup Drive. Although the forest was burnt by bushfires in late 2021, it has already started to regenerate. Stop to

take a short walk through the grand 190m-high trees, some of the world's tallest. If you've got any tree-hugging tendencies hidden away deep inside you, this is when and where they will emerge!

The limestone ridge of the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park also hides a series of caves, many of which are open to the public. You can explore Calgardup, Giants and Mammoth caves on your own (you'll need a torch), or join a tour — the most popular are Jewel Cave just north of Augusta, which is home to one of the longest straw stalactites to be found in any tourist cave, and Lake Cave near Margaret River, which has some beautiful reflections and the richly decorated Ngilgi Cave, just north of Yallingup.

The official collective noun for rays is a fever, so try not to get too feverish counting the smooth stingrays, black stingrays and eagle rays at Hamelin Bay. With wing spans of up to a metre across, these massive but very graceful creatures congregate in the shallows on the beach near the old jetty and can be seen most days, although you have a better chance during the summer months. They are not aggressive but can stab you if you inadvertently step on one half buried in the sand, so it pays to keep well out of reach: the venomous barb is at the base of the tail.

Continue south past barely there beachside communities as you head towards Cape Leeuwin, the most south-westerly tip of Australia. The lighthouse here has watched over the point where the Indian and Southern oceans meet since 1895. It's a good place to watch whales off the shore and during spring, masses of beautiful wildflowers dot the windswept headland.

If you can tear yourself away from the views, and resist the urge for one last meal, it's roughly a three-and-a-half-hour drive north back to Perth.

THESE PAGES: (Clockwise from above) Dolphin watching at Rockingham; Voyager Estate, Margaret River; stingrays at Hamelin, near Augusta; Conto Beach, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park; Jewel Cave, near Augusta.

WHERE TO STAY

Cape Lodge, Yallingup ***capelodge.com.au***
Grand Mecure Basildene Manor, Margaret River ***basildenemanor.com.au***
Margarets Beach Resort, Gnarabup Beach ***margaretsbeachresort.com.au***

PLACES TO EAT & DRINK

Cicerello's, Fremantle, ***cicerellos.com.au***
Cheeky Monkey Brewery & Cidery, Wilyabrup ***cheekymonkey.com.au***
Margaret River Distilling Co, Margaret River ***distillery.com.au***
Leeuwin Estate Winery, Margaret River ***leeuwinestate.com.au***
Voyager Estate, Margaret River ***voyagerestate.com.au***
Augusta Hotel, Augusta ***augustahotel.com.au/dining***

WHAT TO DO

Prison Tours, Fremantle ***fremantleprison.com.au***
Wildlife encounters, Rockingham ***dolphins.com.au***
BRAG - Bunbury Regional Art Gallery ***bunbury.wa.gov.au/brag***
Dolphin and whale watching, Bunbury ***dolphindiscovery.com.au***
Underwater Observatory, Busselton Jetty ***busseltonjetty.com.au***
Yallingup Galleries and Sculpture Trail, Yallingup ***yallingupgalleries.com.au***
Cave tours, Margaret River, ***margaretriver.com/things-to-do/attractions/caves***
Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park ***exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au/site/cape-leeuwin-lighthouse***
Cape Naturaliste Lighthouse, Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park ***exploreparks.dbca.wa.gov.au/site/cape-naturaliste***

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